

Now that it's February, Christmas 2016 seems awfully long ago and we have chewed up one twelfth of 2017 already. All of the Christmas exchanges and returns should be taken care of by this time, so this is a good time to reflect on Christmas reality. I've noticed there is often a gap between Christmas expectations and Christmas reality. Speaking of reality, I'm also hoping that you have things squared away with the credit card companies by now. Thinking about what God gave at Christmas can raise profound questions. Some of these questions were, in fact, raised and wrestled with by the Gospel writers in each of the four Gospels. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus himself speaks about giving to the world as God gave to the world by being salt and light.

But before we dig into Jesus' message I would like to ask a question. What's the worst Christmas gift you've ever gotten? I'm not talking about the gift you got at the White Elephant Gift Exchange that you left behind, hiding under your chair, but a true gift that you were really given that was really awful.

A couple of years ago, *Time* magazine ran a story written by Kit Yarrow that chronicled some of the worst gifts given that readers had submitted. One woman reader shared that for years, her mother-in-law had bought the other daughter-in-law an expensive makeup or perfume, and then she proceeded to give this daughter-in-law the free gift that came with it. Another reader shared how she had received a waffle iron from her husband. That wouldn't be the worst gift ever, except for what was implied in the relationship. “He thought if we had a waffle iron, I could make waffles for him,” she said—which makes you wonder whether he really was trying to give her a gift, or whether he wanted to give himself a gift breakfast.

Another reader shared how they were given a manila file folder for Christmas. Yes, just one manila file folder. But that one was actually generous compared to one reader whose spouse always tells them, “Things will be cheaper after Christmas sales!” Then they never actually give them anything—they just say, “I owe you one!” We all know a bad gift at Christmas when we see it. But I would suggest that it's more important to give the gift of yourself. That's what Jesus did, and that is what he is urging us to do in the Sermon on the Mount.

God knows and we know this is a dark world filled with the darkness of crime, doubt and despair. The Light of the world, Jesus Christ, left the world at his ascension and now the lesser lights, we Christians, are shining. Ours is a world badly in need of Christ's light. In the darkness we are groping for truth, meaning, and purpose in life. The only light the world now has to find purpose, meaning and truth is the light of Christians. Are we Christians truly light? In our neighborhoods, do Christians stand out as a light in the darkness?

There is a tremendous need for us to hear Jesus' words—to arouse and motivate one another to let our lights shine. Christians *are* the light of the world. Jesus said, “*You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden*” (Matthew 5:14).

William Barclay says of Jesus' statement, “It may well be said that this was the greatest compliment that was ever paid to the individual Christian, for in it Jesus commands the Christian to be what he himself claimed to be.” YOU are the light of the world. In John 9:5 Jesus states: “*While I am in the world, I am*

*the light of the world.*” I’d say that Jesus is demanding nothing less than that we should be like him; speak like him, act like him, and love like him.

This light emanates from the gospel message that Jesus proclaimed, and which Paul summarizes in 1 Corinthians 2:9&10: *As it is written: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” — the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.* Simply put, I think in Matthew 5 Jesus is saying, “Be what you are.” A Christian needs to be genuine, true blue. We dare not be a phony or a hypocrite. Does the average Christian know who he or she is so they can be and do what they are? What we are is stated in verses 13 and 14: salt, light. Salt and light are different from the world. If salt loses its saltiness, it is like the world. A Christian has a quality of life the world does not have.

Light is different from darkness; if the light goes out, it too becomes darkness. Express what you are. To be of value, salt must lose itself in that which it flavors. Light expends itself and gets lost in the darkness. A candle expends itself by burning its wick down to nothing. Turn on your light!

Before entering each one of the four tunnels on the PA Turnpike there is a sign that says, “Turn on your headlights.” Even though there are overhead lights in the tunnels, you are entering darkness and you need light on the road in front of you. In our dark world of sin, we need light to see the path of righteousness. As Christians we are lights because we reflect the Light of the world, our Savior. Christ has given us light and it is our responsibility to let that light shine. A few questions about being the light continue to haunt me—

Is our light shining? Like the foolish virgins in Jesus’ parable, have our lamps gone out? And where is our light shining? A bright light in midday is unnecessary and wasted. Is our light shining in the dark places of the night where light is needed? Can our light be seen? Barclay says, “Christianity is something which is meant to be seen.” I think our acts of service and love enable the light to be seen. Jesus goes on to say in v. 16: *“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

Life is expendable. Because life is so very precious, most of us try to preserve and prolong it as long as possible. We want to live forever without getting old. For a life to be both worthwhile and a blessing, life must be expended. Jesus taught, *“He that loses his life for my sake shall find it.”* The same principle applies to the salt and light of Matthew 5. Jesus tells us we are salt and light. To be these we must expend ourselves for the good of the world, and to glorify God. Get involved — like salt that is mixed with food that needs salt. Get absorbed — like salt that loses itself in what it salts. Light burns up and burns out. A candle gives light until its wick is gone and is consumed. Light also gets lost in the darkness by overcoming it.

Ann Tyler, in her novel *Morgan’s Passing*, told the story of a middle-aged Baltimore man who passed through people’s lives with astonishing poise and expertise in assuming roles and gratifying expectations. The novel opens with Morgan watching a puppet show on a church lawn on a Sunday afternoon. A few minutes into the show, a young man comes from behind the puppet stage and asks, “Is there a doctor here?” After thirty or forty seconds with no response from the audience, Morgan stands up, slowly and deliberately approaches the young man, and asks, “What is the trouble?”

The puppeteer's pregnant wife is in labor; a birth seems imminent. Morgan puts the young couple in the back of his station wagon and sets off for Johns Hopkins Hospital. Halfway there the husband says, "The baby is coming!"

Morgan, calm and self-assured, pulls to the curb, sends the about-to-be father to the corner to buy a Sunday paper as a substitute for towels and bed sheets, and delivers the baby. He then drives to the emergency room of the hospital, sees the mother and baby safely to a stretcher, and disappears.

After the excitement dies down, the couple asks for Dr. Morgan to thank him. But no one has ever heard of a Dr. Morgan. They are puzzled—and frustrated that they can't express their gratitude. Several months later they are pushing their baby in a stroller and see Morgan walking on the other side of the street. They run over and greet him, showing him the healthy baby that he brought into the world. They tell him how hard they had looked for him, and of the hospital's bureaucratic incompetence in tracking him down.

In an unaccustomed gush of honesty, Morgan admits to them that he is not really a doctor. In fact, he runs a hardware store. But they needed a doctor, and being a doctor in those circumstances was not all that difficult. He has been doing this all his life, impersonating doctors, lawyers, pastors, counselors as occasions present themselves. Then he confides, "You know, I would never pretend to be a plumber or impersonate a butcher—they would find me out in twenty seconds."

Morgan knew something that most Christians learn fairly early in their life as a disciple of Jesus: the outward aspects of following Jesus can be faked. We can impersonate a Christian without being a Christian. The problem, though, is that while we can get by with it in our community, or even our church, we can't get by with it within ourselves or with God.

We are the light of the world. That cannot be faked. Since Jesus said he was the Light of the world, this may seem to be a contradiction. But we Christians *are* the light. We don't have to *choose* to be the light. Nor do we have to *wait* to become the light by virtue of our good works. Some of us are dimmer and some of us are brighter, for sure. The light we have is the reflection of the Light of Christ who dwells in us by faith. If our light is not seen in this dark world, it may indicate we are not in Christ and Christ is not in us. If the light is in us, it will be seen by our good works and will give others reason to glorify our Father in heaven.

Shine Christian friends! Shine! Because we *are* the light. Amen.