

**Sermon preached by Rev. Jim Spurgeon at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 27, 2008**

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

Zechariah 4:1-14

Jesus said: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16, ESV).

This is surely the Scripture behind the little children’s chorus you are still teaching your children, “This Little Light of Mine” – you know, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” I checked this out and I know you’re teaching that song to our grandson – and I thank you for it.

Jesus pictures His followers as lights shining in the world. As such, you followers of Jesus are to have an impact on the world which has the result of encouraging them to glorify God. This image is paired in the Sermon on the Mount with the image of salt – you are the salt of the earth. The point Jesus makes with both images is that there are things you can do to keep the salt and the light from having its proper impact on the world.

So, just what does Jesus’ warning mean for us? What kinds of things can we do to keep the light from having its effect? How can we keep the light burning brightly as we urge our children to do when we teach them the song?

Now, this idea of God’s people being light is not an isolated one in Scripture. Israel was to be light for the Gentiles: “I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations” (Isaiah 42:6, ESV).

In our time this morning I want to look at one of the Old Testament pictures given to us in Zechariah 4. How can my light shine brightly so that God may be glorified? I believe Zechariah emphasizes something which in an activist world can be missed.

Your light must be fueled by the presence of God (Zechariah 4:1-10). In this conversation with an angel, the prophet Zechariah is shown a vision of a lampstand. God gives Zechariah this vision at a time when the Israelites are in a bad situation. They have returned from exile, but the Temple and Jerusalem are in shambles and they are seeking to rebuild, but they are stalled and discouraged in the work. Zerubbabel, the governor, is seeking to move the building forward but there are many obstacles. The visions of Zechariah are given to encourage the people with promises of God’s power for the work.

Now, it is quite a remarkable picture – quite a contraption of a lampstand. The first part of the picture (vs. 2) is a lampstand all of gold with seven lamps. Now to the Israelites

that was a very familiar picture. It obviously recalls the lampstand of the Tabernacle and the Temple. As the priest entered the Holy Place, there were three pieces of furniture before him. As he stood facing the curtain guarding the Holy of Holies, he saw directly before him just in front of the entrance to the Holy of Holies, the altar of incense for which he had regularly to supply incense according to a recipe given by God.

Then to his right was the table of showbread – literally “bread of the face” which he was regularly required to replace and keep fresh. Finally, to his left stood the golden lampstand which also he was required to service regularly. It was fueled by olive oil. Exodus 27:20 specifies pure beaten olive oil according to God’s command.

But Zechariah is led by God to move the picture forward and to introduce some new elements. As your eye moves up and back from the lamps you see seven conduits of some sort connecting the lamps to a bowl which we come to see serves as a reservoir for the olive oil. Then in verse 3, on either side of the bowl, stands an olive tree – two olive trees, one on the right and the other on the left of the bowl.

We skip down to verse 12 and we find two golden pipes carrying golden oil from the olive trees to the bowl and then out by the conduits to the seven lamps. When you think about it in mechanical terms, it is quite a contraption.

So, what does all this mean? In verses 4 and 5 there is an exchange between the angel and Zechariah which serves to heighten the prophet’s interest. In verse 4 Zechariah asks the question which is upon all of our minds, “And I said to the angel who talked with me, ‘What are these, my lord?’” (Zechariah 4:4, ESV).

In verse 5 the angel throws it back to Zechariah, “Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, ‘Do you not know what these are?’ I said, ‘No, my lord.’” (Zechariah 4:5, ESV).

Finally in verse 6, the angel reveals the meaning of the mysterious contraption of the vision: “Then he said to me, ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.’” (Zechariah 4:6, ESV).

God, by an ever renewing source of the Spirit will find the work of His people for His glory. As the cruz of oil did not fail the widow of Zeraphath in the days of Elijah, so now, the Israelites are promised a never-ending supply of energy from God for the work which brought Him glory. By the supply of God, the lamps would continue to burn and the purposes of God’s kingdom would move forward.

There can be little question that this picture anticipates the New Testament. So, Jesus said to His disciples, “You are the light of the world.” In the great commission Jesus promised, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Then Jesus follows that promise with the promise of the Spirit, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8, ESV).

So it was, by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that Jesus’ followers would shine and the world was turned upsidedown.

Your light can be hidden and kept from giving its light (Matthew 5:14-16). Now, we must deal with Jesus’ warning that it is possible to hide your light so that it would not have its proper effect upon the world.

Paul, under the inspiration of God’s Spirit is led to provide what, I think, is really a commentary on Jesus’ warning: “...for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)” (Ephesians 5:8-9, ESV).

Jesus issues the warning with two metaphors. First, “...you are the salt of the earth.” But Jesus warns that the salt can lose its saltiness – it can lose its power to impact the world in the way Jesus designs. Jesus warns that the saltiness cannot be restored and the salt has become worthless.

Second, “...you are the light of the world.” But the light can be hidden, obscured, so that it doesn’t have an impact on the world. Positively, the city set on a hill cannot be hidden. The lamp should be on a lampstand so that it impacts the whole house.

Paul indicates twice in his epistles that we can interfere with the Spirit’s supply to our lives of the Spirit’s fruit from our lives. Ephesians 4:30: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30, ESV). “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19, ESV).

You see, this business of the Christian life is not automatic. It is a relationship – an interaction between you and God whereby you offer yourself to Him and He brings forth good things for His kingdom through your life. It is, in one of Paul’s favorite expressions, “walking” consistent with the call which has been extended to us in Christ. It is Christ living in you by faith, and by His Spirit bringing forth fruit.

The main place in the gospels where Jesus teaches about lamps is in Matthew 25, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Remember – 10 attendants – bridesmaids if you will – going to a wedding. In the custom, their business is to wait for the appearance of the bridegroom, who is now delayed. When the bridegroom finally comes, the five foolish virgins realize that they have run out of oil and are not ready to attend to the bridegroom. The other five have a continuing supply of oil and are ready to meet the bridegroom upon His appearance.

The overall point is that while the Master is away, we are to be shining by the power of the Spirit, so that whenever the Master returns, He will find you faithful in His things.

How do I keep this little light shining? Back to Zechariah 4 – something more about the olive trees in verses 11-14. There is an exchange between the prophet and the angel, much as in the opening verses. Now, Zechariah wants to know about the two olive trees, “What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?” He actually repeats the question twice. Finally, the angel answers, “Then he said, ‘These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth’” (Zechariah 4:14, ESV).

This is not an easy passage, but let's look at it for a moment. If you have the NIV or the ESV, you'll see a note beside “anointed ones” which gives you the literal translation – “sons of oil” or “oily ones.” In the Old Testament both kings and priests are anointed with oil as a sign of their call to service as God's chosen vessels. We see this in David's anointing, “Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah” (1 Samuel 16:13, ESV).

The oil in the horn of Samuel has its immediate fulfillment in the coming of the Holy Spirit. David is anointed in the physical world by the oil, but the Spirit comes upon him to enable him to rule God's people as a true shepherd. The priests are likewise anointed with oil in their ordination.

But, you know, there is a fulfillment in Scripture to this idea of anointing, or “anointed one” – supremely, it is the Lord Jesus Christ. The titles “Messiah” in Hebrew and “Christ” in Greek both mean “anointed one.” At Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit is poured out.

So, Jesus comes declaring, “I am the light of the world!” And how is it that God's resources come to the New Testament people of God? It is alone in union with Jesus Christ.

Listen to the writer to the Hebrews, “But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness, therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions’” (Hebrews 1:8-9, ESV).

So, where does your supply come from? It comes from Jesus Christ. How do you keep your light shining? By knowing Christ Jesus! It is in union with Christ – joined to Him in His death and resurrection that the life of God and the ministry of the Spirit ignite your life for God's purposes. Letting your light shine is not first and foremost programs and projects. It begins in the presence of God where, in prayer and devotion you seek His face. It is in His presence you become a shining light. “Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,…” (Philippians 2:14-15, ESV).

As in Zechariah's day, there seem to be many challenges to the gospel of Jesus Christ today. In an increasingly secular culture, the witness of the gospel to the culture is more difficult. There is the temptation to blend into the world and not be aflame with the love of Christ. That's hiding it under a basket. No, says Jesus, let your light shine, that through your life, the life of Jesus may be seen and attention drawn to the source of life.

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, ESV). Let it shine till Jesus comes. If you're Christ's true disciple today, you are represented by those five wise virgins waiting for the bridegroom with lamps trimmed and ready. But in those lamps is the Spirit of God and by His power your light will burn until the Master returns to claim His true bride.

My language is all full of pictures and images, but they are all drawn from the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus. Let your light shine.