

# Christians the Light of the World

by Charles Finney

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*Christians have the responsibility to enlighten the world by holding up the light of their example and performing good works that demonstrate the true intent and meaning of God's law.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:14

**Topics:** "Being a Light", "Responsibility of Christians"

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## Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that Christians are called to be the light of the world, illuminating the spiritual darkness that envelops it. He explains that the world is ignorant of God, His law, and their own condition, and it is the responsibility of Christians to enlighten others through their good works and example. Finney stresses that if the world remains in darkness, it is the fault of Christians who fail to shine their light and live out their faith authentically. He urges believers to hold up their light in contrast to the darkness around them, demonstrating the true spirit of God's law through their actions. Ultimately, Christians must recognize their role as representatives of Christ, tasked with spreading His light to a lost world.

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## Transcript

TEXT.--Matt. 5:14-16: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a 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."

I shall show,

I. THAT THE WORLD IS IN GREAT SPIRITUAL DARKNESS.

II. THAT CHRISTIANS, UNDER GOD, ARE TO ENLIGHTEN IT.

III. HOW THEY ARE TO DO THIS.

IV. IF THE WORLD IS NOT ENLIGHTENED, IT IS THE FAULT OF CHRISTIANS.

I. The world is in great spiritual darkness.

1. Impenitent sinners are universally ignorant of the true God. Many of them may have a correct theory in some respects. But after all they know not God. To know God and Jesus Christ, is to have eternal life. And

while in their sins, they have no correct apprehension of the true God.

2. They are in great darkness in respect to the spirituality of his law. If they understood the spirituality of his law, they would understand something of his character and of their own. The truth is they have no correct apprehensions of the true spirit and meaning of God's law.

And here let me say that when we speak of the spirituality of God's law, there are many minds who seem to turn away from us as if we were speaking very mystically. What, they say, law is law. We can understand what God's law says as well as you can, and do understand it as well as you do. And why should you mystify and speak of its spirituality as if it had some occult meaning which none but the initiated can understand? To this I reply:

(1.) That to be sure, law is law.

(2.) That every law has its letter and its spirit: i.e. the general statement of its propositions in words is its letter; the true intent and meaning of it, in its real application to every state of facts, is its spirit. Now the world are in total darkness in respect to the true meaning of the law of God. E.g. The first commandment is, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Now this command has both its letter and its spirit. And so has every commandment of God. Its letter prohibits all idolatrous worship. Its spirit requires supreme, disinterested, universal, perpetual love to God, with every holy affection carried out in every holy action.

As a farther illustration, take the commandment, "Thou shalt not steal." The letter of this commandment, prohibits the secret taking of another's property, and using it as if it were our own, without intention of returning it. But the spirit of this commandment forbids all covetousness and requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It prohibits our using our neighbor's goods, selfishly, whether with or without his consent. It prohibits every form of fraud, speculation, and taking any advantage in business, that is inconsistent with the royal rule, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Now who does not know that unconverted sinners are in the dark in regard to the spirituality of these and every other command of God. What horrible conviction and consternation would fill the world if sinners but thoroughly understood the spirituality of God's law.

3. Sinners are ignorant of themselves. They know very little of their own constitution, and in most cases still less of their character. This ignorance of their own character is a natural consequence of their ignorance of the law of God. Being ignorant of the true intent and meaning of the standard with which they are to compare themselves, they are of course utterly mistaken in regard to their true character. Judging of themselves only in the light of the letter, and overlooking the breadth of the spirit of the law, they of course form an estimate of their character altogether different from the true one.

4. Sinners are altogether ignorant of their true desert. Being ignorant of the spirituality of the law, they know not either the number or the exceeding demerit of their sins.

5. Sinners know not their own helplessness, nor do they understand the remedy which God has provided for healing their souls. They neither care for, nor know but little about the remedy, because they are ignorant of their disease.

6. Sinners are ignorant of what is really good for them, and what will in the highest manner promote their own well being, both in time and eternity.

7. Consequently they are pursuing exactly the course, that must eventually and necessarily result in their everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power.

## II. Christians, under God, are to enlighten the world.

1. Because they have the true light. They know God. They understand the spirituality of his law. They know the character of man. They know his guilt, desert, helplessness, and necessities. They have seen their own ignorance, and know that the world is in darkness and lieth in wickedness. They have the most certain knowledge of this, and the best of all knowledge, that of their own experience. They also know the remedy for sinners. They have been enlightened by the true light. True christians have all been taught of God. They know God and Jesus Christ, whom to know is life eternal. They are conscious of so knowing him as to have eternal life abiding in them. They can truly say, from their own consciousness, "Where as I was blind, now I see." They then are the persons, and the only persons in all the world, that are capable of enlightening the world. It is in vain for unconverted philosophers or statesmen, or any unconverted persons whatever to talk of enlightening the world. The light that is in them is great darkness. And when they talk of enlightening the world, they know not what they say, nor whereof they affirm. They speak at random, and deceive their followers. They are blind leaders of the blind, and they all stumble on together upon the dark mountains, till teachers and disciples fall into the pit of destruction together.

2. The world must be enlightened through human instrumentality. Constituted as men are, truth must address them through the medium of the senses. Consequently God found it necessary to unite Himself with human nature in order to enlighten men. Taking to Himself human nature, He lived, and conversed, and ate, and drank, and held conversation with men through the medium of his human nature. And this possessed their minds of the true idea of who and what He is. He exhibited in his own life, and in all his deportment, the spirit of his own law. By his teachings, but more especially by his life, He called the attention of men away from the letter to the spirit of his law, and when He gave them precepts, He gave them illustrations of their meaning in his own example, and thus possessed their minds of the nature of true religion, and what it was to love their neighbor as themselves.

3. None have had the true light but those who have received it through the instrumentality of the saints of God. From the earliest period of man's existence, God has caused the light to shine upon the world through human beings. Sometimes He has had but few representatives on earth. And gross darkness has covered the whole face of the earth, except here and there a little spot has been lighted up, by some pulpit and saint of God. Noah was a light to the old world in its worst estate. Daniel was a light in the idolatrous court of Nebuchadnezzar. Prophets and holy men have been scattered up and down in the earth enough to preserve the true knowledge of God, to a greater or less extent, through these representatives. The Lord Jesus Christ, first in his forerunner John, next in his own person, afterwards in his apostles, and now in all his saints, is enlightening the world. His people are now the medium through which He discovers Himself to mankind. His spirit dwells in them "working in them to will and to do of his good pleasure." They are his disciples who teach his doctrines, exhibit his spirit, and thus at once rebuke and enlighten the darkness of the world.

## III. How Christians can enlighten the world.

Under this head I inquire what constitutes the christian's light, or what renders him a light to others? Ans.

1. It is not simply his creed.

2. Not simply his profession.
3. Nor is it his profession and creed together.
4. Not his sanctimonious appearance on the Sabbath.
5. Nor his sitting at the communion table.
6. Nor does his light consist in all these together. But,
7. His light consists in his temper and spirit.
8. In his good works in a most strict regard to the universal law of love. As Christ did, so does the christian. His life is a commentary upon the law of God. He is giving continual illustrations in his own temper and spirit and life, of the spirituality, the true intent and meaning of the law of God.
9. In his practical and firm opposition to all that is unholy or injurious to the souls or bodies of men, and in the manifestation of his undying attachment, to whatever is holy, lovely and of good report.

Christians then can enlighten the world, not

1. By conforming to whatever is wrong in their tempers, views or practices--not by any direct or indirect connivance at their sins, worldly mindedness, or whatever is the result of their darkness.
2. Not by any compromise of principle or by conciliating their favor, by keeping out of view the points of difference between themselves and sinners. Some professors of religion seem disposed to avoid all controversy with impenitent men, to lessen as far as possible the differences of opinion, and views, and practices between themselves and sinners. They seem to think that the true way to enlighten them, is by falling in with them as far as possible & by conforming in a great measure to their customs, views, business practices, and almost every thing else. Now this is as far as possible from the true philosophy of enlightening the world. It is as if you attempted to clear the eye-sight of your neighbor by putting out your own eyes. It is like attempting to pull the mote out of your neighbor's eye, not by plucking the beam out of your own eye, but by filling your own eye both with beams and motes. If you wish to convince a man that he is in the dark, you must hold up your own light, in contrast with his darkness. If he can see your light, it will discover his own darkness.
3. Christians can never enlighten the world by any thing that will imply that they lay but little practical stress upon the points of difference between them and sinners. It is in vain to attempt to enlighten the world by any course of conduct that is calculated to make the impression that the real difference between saints and sinners lies merely or mostly in opinion, if after all the practices of Christians are such as demonstrate that their opinions have very little to do with practice. But,
4. Christians can enlighten the world by holding up the light of their own example on all subjects in strong and constant contrast with the example of the ungodly.
5. They can enlighten the world by a patient and firm perseverance in well doing, in spite of all the opposition of earth and hell. To what a wonderful extent did the Apostles and primitive Christians succeed in enlightening the world. This was a thing of course. Their lives were a perpetual light, dissipating the moral darkness around them. They did not hold forth a flickering, waving, and uncertain light. It was clear, steady, pure, and had well nigh banished darkness from the earth. In the text Christ says, "let your light so

shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven." "So shine." How? Ans. By exhibiting our good works in contrast with their evil works, and that continually.

6. By exhibiting our self-denial, in contrast with their self-indulgence, and that continually.

7. By exhibiting our heavenly mindedness, in contrast with their worldly mindedness.

8. By showing that our conversation is in heaven, in contrast with their showing that their conversation is of earth.

9. By showing that our treasure is in heaven, in contrast with their showing that their treasure is on earth.

10. By showing our conformity to correct principles, in contrast with their disregard of them.

11. By showing our conformity to the laws of our being, in contrast with their shameless violations of them.

12. By manifesting our faith in Christ, in contrast with their unbelief.

13. By manifesting our sweet submission to all the providential dealings of God, in contrast with their restlessness and rebellion against his providence.

14. By holding up on every subject and in every way, both by precept and example, the light of truth in opposition to their darkness. In these and in similar ways can christians enlighten the world.

But by blinding the light, by making any compromise, by frittering away the points of difference, by going one hair's breadth aside from the love of truth, for the sake of conciliating their favor, they will not, and never can enlighten them.

IV. If the world is not enlightened, it is the fault of Christians.

1. Because Christians have the means of enlightening the world. They have the gospel and the means of spreading it throughout the world. They have the true light in their own hearts, and have the means of exhibiting it to all mankind.

2. They have abundant opportunities to enlighten the world. God has stationed them in different parts of the world, for the very purpose of enlightening the world. He has commanded them to go, and given them the means of going and holding up their light in every dark corner of the world. When the early Christians clung together in Jerusalem, He scattered them in all countries by the force of a persecution. And they "went every where preaching the gospel." And being thus scattered, they learned the true philosophy of enlightening and converting the world.

3. The world is expecting and looking to Christians to enlighten them. The eyes of ungodly men are turned to the Church, and marking their example, taking knowledge of their lives, spirit, and ways, and wherever among professors, there is a true Christian, his light is seen, as a matter of fact, to rebuke the darkness around him.

4. If the world is not enlightened, it is the fault of Christians, because, if the truth is properly and fully exhibited, it will dispel their darkness. The human mind is so constituted that truth "commends itself to every man's conscience in the sight of God." There is no mistake about this. The human mind is true to its own laws. And when truth is clearly, strongly, and constantly exhibited, it will and must rebuke the

darkness of any human mind.

5. The principal business which Christians have in this world is, to enlighten the world. Christ has gone to heaven. He has left Christians as his representatives, to carry out the revelation of God and shine as lights in the world. If He should take all Christians immediately from the world, it would leave the world in impenetrable and hopeless darkness, notwithstanding all that has been done to enlighten it. These must be illustrations of religious truth. The minds of men are so dark, they are prone to view religious truth so much in the abstract, and as so purely a matter of opinion, that without living illustrations, truth seldom, if ever gains possession of their minds.

6. Christians are in fault, if the world is not enlightened, because they can have any degree of spiritual illumination which they need to carry forward and complete the enlightening of the world. Christ has promised you the Holy Spirit, and has told you that God "is more willing to give it than earthly parents are to give good gifts to their children." Every needed aid is abundantly guaranteed by the same promise of God to Christians. And in full view of these exceeding great and precious promises Christ has said to them, "Ye are the light of the world." And now, "let your light so shine before men that they, seeing your good works, [not merely hearing your good doctrines, but seeing your good works,]\* may glorify your father who is in heaven.

7. Nothing can prevent your enlightening the world, but a refusal on your part to perform good works. If you perform good works men will see them. If they see them they will be constrained to glorify your Father which is in heaven. If then men are not enlightened, it is because you do not perform good works. In other words, it is because you are not Christians. Observe Christ does not say, ye ought to be the light of the world. But "Ye are the light of the world." As the word of Christ is true, real Christians are the light of the world. And this is a matter of fact. True Christians have the spirit of Christ, for the possession of this spirit is what constitutes them Christians. The spirit of Christ will always manifest itself in performing the works of Christ. If therefore men do not see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven, it is only because you have the form, and not the spirit of Christianity. And "if the light that is in you be darkness, how great is that darkness."

#### REMARKS.

1. How much evil is done by temporizing and keeping out of view the great and numberless points of difference between Christianity and the spirit of the world, as if we could show ungodly men the necessity of a great and radical change in themselves, by as nearly conforming our lives and tempers to theirs as possible. It is only by strong and constant contrast that the conviction of the necessity of a radical change in themselves, is to be forced home upon them. The more striking and constant this contrast, the better: the more universal and perfect this contrast is, the more sudden and irresistible will be their conviction of the necessity of a great and radical change in themselves.

2. We see from this subject how utterly injudicious it is to conceal the true light, on any great subject of reform, whenever a favorable opportunity should present itself to hold it up. Some ministers and professors of religion, seem to be always waiting to have the people find out the truth themselves, and for such a public sentiment to be formed as will anticipate and render it popular to hold up any heretofore unpopular or offensive doctrine. They seem not inclined to go ahead and rebuke the darkness of the public mind, by holding up the true light. They seem to dread the loss of their own popularity, and as they say, fear to injure their usefulness, by calling things by their right names, by declaring their own experience of

the power of the gospel of the blessed God, by at once preaching and bringing out the whole truth before the world. In order to render themselves popular with all parties, they will so hold forth certain unpopular truths, as that the already initiated, will perceive that they believe them and correctly teach them: but in such language, with such provisos and caveats as that none others will suspect them of believing or teaching any such thing. If the whole Church and congregation were but to get right, without their instrumentality, if a public sentiment should be formed that would invite their coming out in plain language, they would then become bold champions for the truth. But they are waiting for the Churches to learn the truth before they declare it to them. And when it becomes popular to tell the whole truth, they will be the first to tell it.

3. The same is true of multitudes of professing Christians, in respect to their lives. For their worldly-mindedness, and for all forms and degrees of conformity to the world, they plead the force of public sentiment, that it will not do to differ from every body else, and that the law of expediency demands of them a good degree of conformity to the world, in order to secure an influence over them. But is this the way to enlighten the world? Instead of setting yourself to correct public opinion, do you suffer yourself to become the mere creature of it? Instead of opposing what is wrong in the views and practices of mankind, on every subject, do you fall in with them, and thus strengthen their bands, and confirm them in their darkness, expecting that by and by public sentiment will change so that you can do your duty without losing your influence, so that you can declare what God has done for your soul, relate your experience of the power of his grace, and hold up your light in the midst of the acclamations of the crowd? What a delusive dream is this!

4. Christians should remember that silence on any great subject of moral reform, that hiding their light either in precept or example, when a suitable opportunity occurs for exhibiting it, implies either that they do not believe it, or that it is with them a mere matter of opinion, and that they lay little or no practical stress upon it. Or else it implies that they are ashamed of it.

5. How cruel it is to let people remain in darkness through a fear of losing our own popularity. On what multitudes of subjects, are people injuring both their bodies and their souls for lack of correct information. And how shameful and cruel it is for those who have the true light, to hide it.

6. We see from this subject, the importance of believers in the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life, holding up this infinitely important doctrine, both by principle and example, whenever they have the opportunity. They should be "living epistles known and read of all men."

7. Unless Christians hold up the true light in contrast with the world's darkness, they are the greatest curses that are in the world. They are like a false light, that decoys the unwary mariners upon the rocks and quicksands. The world knows that you are professors of religion, that you are set as a moral light-house. They therefore think it safe to steer in the direction in which your light indicates that they should go. If therefore the light that is in you be darkness, what a curse are you to your family, your neighborhood, and the world around you. They will look at you. They mark your words. They ponder well your temper, and spirit, and life. They feel themselves safe in copying your example, in drinking in of your spirit, and in steering their course to eternity, by your light. And what a cruel monster are you, if you mislead them. What do you say of pirates who erect a false light upon some shoal, to decoy the unwary mariners to dash upon it, for the sake of plunder? Does not your blood curdle in your veins? Do not cold chills run over you? Does not your soul shudder when you read of the abominable selfishness of those who hold up false lights to mariners at sea, destroying so many lives, and so much property, for the sake

of gratifying their odious selfishness? But professors of religion, you are the light of the world. Do you hold up a false light in the midst of the world's darkness? And when thousands of sinners are hovering round about upon your coast, benighted and bestormed, and looking to you for light, are you engaged in your selfish projects, exhibiting a carnal, earthly, and devilish spirit, while they are running upon the rocks and quicksands, ruining their souls, and going to hell by scores around you? Hear the wail of that lost soul, as it dashes upon the rocks, and sinks to hell. It lifts its eyes and cries out, O, I did not dream that evil was near. I had my eye upon that professor of religion. I transacted business upon the same principles, upon which I saw he transacted his. I kept my eye upon him and steered my bark by his light. And oh, unutterable horror, I am in the depths of an eternal hell!

\* Brackets are in the original text.

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