

Lights in the World

by Watchman Nee

We are to shine our light before men and glorify God by radiating his light in the world, not by getting out of the world.

Scripture: Matthew 5:14, John 1:9, John 8:12

Topics: "Light Of The World", "Engaging with Culture"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes that Jesus declared Himself as the light of the world and, astonishingly, called His disciples, and by extension us, the light of the world as well. He urges believers to shine their light through good works, revealing the world's darkness and glorifying God. Nee contrasts the mission of the Church with that of John the Baptist, asserting that Christians are not meant to withdraw from the world but to engage with it, bringing the light of Christ into every aspect of life. He highlights that true peace, joy, and righteousness come from the Holy Spirit, enabling believers to overcome worldly tribulations. Ultimately, the Church's role is to illuminate the world and proclaim the good news, fulfilling God's purpose amidst darkness.

Transcript

Without fear of challenge Jesus could say: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). His claim does not surprise us in the least. What is surprising, however, is that he should then say to his disciples, and so by implication to us: "Ye are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). For he does not exhort us to be that light; he plainly says that we are the world's light, whether we bring our illumination out into places where men can see it, or hide it away from them. The divine life planted in us, which itself is so utterly foreign to the world all around it, is a light source designed to illumine to mankind the world's true character by emphasizing through contrast its inherent darkness. Accordingly Jesus goes on: "Even so let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." From this it is clear that to separate ourselves from the world today, and thus deprive it of its only light, in no way glorifies God. It merely thwarts his purpose in us and in mankind.

It is true that, as we saw earlier, the career of John the Baptist was rather different. He did in fact withdraw from the world to live austere in desert places apart, subsisting, we are told, on locusts and wild honey. Men went out there to seek him, for even there he was a burning and a shining light. Yet we are reminded that "he was not that Light." He came only to bear witness to it. His testimony was the last and greatest of an old prophetic order, but it was so because it pointed forward to Jesus. Jesus alone was "the true Light

which lighteth every man, coming into the world"; and he certainly "was in the world," not outside of it (John 1:9, 10). Christianity derives from him. God can use a John crying in the wilderness, but he never intended his Church to be a select company living by the principle of abstinence.

Earlier we saw how abstinence-"handle not, nor taste, nor touch"-was merely one more element in the world system, and as such was itself suspect (Col. 2:21). But we must go a stage further than this, and once again the apostle Paul comes to our help. In Romans 14:17 he shows how the Christian life is something removed altogether from controversy about what we do and what we don't do. "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking"-not, that is to say, to be conceived in those terms at all-"but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost," which are in a realm wholly different. The Christian lives, and is guided, not by rules specifying just how far he may mix with men, but by these inward qualities which are mediated to him by God's Holy Spirit.

Righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost: It may be good for a moment to direct our attention to the second of these. For peace, we find, is a potent element in God's answer to his Son's prayer that he would keep us from the evil one (John 17:15).

In God himself there is a peace, a profound undisturbedness of spirit, which keeps him untroubled and undistressed in the face of unspeakable conflict and contradiction. "In the world ye have tribulation," Jesus says, but "in me ye may have peace" (John 16:33). How easily we get troubled as soon as something goes wrong! But do we ever pause to consider what went wrong with the great purpose upon which God had set his heart? God, who is light, had an eternal plan. Causing light to shine out of darkness he designed this world to be the arena of that plan. Then Satan, as we know, stepped in to thwart God, so that men came to love darkness rather than light. Yet in spite of that setback, the implications of which we appreciate all too little, God preserves in himself a quite undisturbed peace. It is that peace of God which, Paul tells us, is to garrison our hearts and thoughts in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7).

What does "garrison" really mean? It means that my foe has to fight through the armed guard at the gates before he can reach me. Before I can be touched, the garrison itself has first to be overcome. So I dare to be as peaceful as God, for the peace that is keeping God is keeping me. This is something that the world knows nothing about. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you" (John 14:27).

How utterly men failed to understand Jesus! Whatever he did was wrong in their eyes, for the light that was in them was darkness. They even dared to identify the Spirit that was in him with Beelzebub the prince of devils. Yet when they accused him of gluttony and drunkenness, what was his response? "Father, I thank thee!" (Matt. 11:19,25). He was unmoved, because in Spirit he abode in the peace of God.

Or recall that last night before his passion. Everything seemed to be going wrong: a friend going out into the night to betray him, another drawing a sword in anger, people going into hiding, or running away naked in their eagerness to escape. In the midst of it all Jesus said to those who had come to take him, "I am he," so peacefully and so quietly that instead of him being nervous it was they who trembled and fell backwards. This was an experience that has been repeated in the martyrs of every age. They could be tortured or burned, but because they possessed his peace, the onlookers could only wonder at their dignity and composure. It is no surprise to us therefore that Paul describes this peace as beyond understanding.

How striking is the contrast Jesus draws between "in the world" where we are to have tribulation, and "in me" where we may have peace. If God has placed us in the one, to be thronged by its pressures and claims and needs, he has placed us also in the Other, to be held by him undisturbed amid it all. Jesus himself once asked, "Who touched me?" The believing touch of one in that Capernaum multitude registered with him. It matched his own heart of compassion, whereas the pressure of the rest crowding upon him had no such effect. All their impatient jostling did not touch him in the least, for there was little in common between them and him. "Not as the world giveth, give I unto you." If our life is the life of men, we are swayed by the world. If it is the life of the Spirit it is unmoved by worldly pressures.

"Righteousness and peace and joy": with such things is the kingdom of God concerned. Never let us be drawn away, therefore, into the old realm of "eating and drinking," for it is neither the prescription of these things nor their prohibition that concerns us, but another world altogether. So we who are of the kingdom need not abstain. We overcome the world not by giving up the world's things but by being otherworldly in a positive way: by possessing, that is, a love and a joy and a peace that the world cannot give and that men sorely need.

Far from seeking to avoid the world we need to see how privileged we are to have been placed there by God. "As thou didst send me into the world, even so send I them into the world." What a statement! The Church is Jesus' successor, a divine settlement planted here right in the midst of Satan's territory. It is something that Satan cannot abide, any more than he could abide Jesus himself, and yet it is something that he cannot by any means rid himself of. It is a colony of heaven, an alien intrusion on his territory, and one against which he is utterly powerless. "Children of God," Paul calls us, "in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye are seen as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15). God has deliberately placed us in the cosmos to show it up for what it is. We are to expose to the divine light, for all men to see them, its God-defying rebelliousness on the one hand and its hollowness and emptiness on the other.

And our task does not stop there. We are to proclaim to men the good news that, if they will turn to it, that light of God in the face of Jesus Christ will set them free from the world's vain emptiness into the fullness that is his. It is this twofold mission of the Church that accounts for Satan's hatred. There is nothing that goads him so much as the Church's presence in the world. Nothing would please him more than to see its telltale light removed. The Church is a thorn in the side of God's adversary, a constant source of irritation and annoyance to him. We make a heap of trouble for Satan simply by being in the world. So why leave it?

"Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel" (Mark 16:15). This is the Christian's privilege. It is also his duty. Those who try to opt out of the world only demonstrate that they are still in some degree in bondage to its ways of thinking. We who are "not of it" have no reason at all to try to leave it, for it is where we should be.

So there is no need for us to give up our secular employments. Far from it, for they are our mission field. In this matter there are no secular considerations, only spiritual ones. We do not live our lives in separate compartments, as Christians in the Church and as secular beings the rest of the time. There is not a thing in our profession or in our employment that God intends should be dissociated from our life as his children. Everything we do, be it in field or highway, in shop, factory, kitchen, hospital or school, has spiritual value in terms of the kingdom of Christ. Everything is to be claimed for him. Satan would much prefer to have no Christians in any of these places, for they are decidedly in his way there. He tries therefore to frighten us out of the world, and if he cannot do that, to get us involved in his world system, thinking in its terms, regulating our behavior by its standards. Either would be a triumph for him. But for us to be in the world,

yet with all our hopes, all our interests and all our prospects out of the world, that is Satan's defeat and God's glory.

Of Jesus' presence in the world it is written that "the darkness overcame it not" (John 1:5 margin). Nowhere in Scripture does it tell us of sin that we are to "overcome" it, but it distinctly says we are to overcome the world. In relation to sin God's word speaks only of deliverance; it is in relation to the world that it speaks of victory.

We need deliverance from sin, because God never intended we should have any touch with it; but we do not need, nor should we seek, deliverance from the world, for it is in the purpose of God that we touch it. We are not delivered out of the world, but being born from above, we have victory over it. And we have that victory in the same sense, and with the same unfailing certainty, that light overcame darkness.

"This is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith. And who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:4, 5). The key to victory is always our faith relationship with the victorious Son. "Be of good cheer," he said. "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Only Jesus could make such a claim; and he could do so because he could earlier affirm: "The prince of the world ... hath nothing in me" (John 14:30). It was the first time that anyone on earth had said such a thing. He said it, and he overcame. And through his overcoming the prince of the world was cast out and Jesus began to draw men to himself.

And because he said it, we now dare say it too. Because of my new birth, because "whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world," I can be in the same world as my Lord was in, and in the same sense as he was I can be utterly apart from it, a lamp set on a lampstand, giving light to all who enter the house. "As he is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17). The Church glorifies God, not by getting out of the world but by radiating his light in it. Heaven is not the place to glorify God; it will be the place to praise him. The place to glorify him is here.

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