Matthew 5:14-16 *Personal, Not Private: The World*

***Bonhoeffer***Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not raised in a particularly radical environment. He was born into an artisocratic family. His mother was daughter of the preacher at the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and his father was a prominent neurologist and professor of psychiatry at the University of Berlin.

He was one of eight children, raised in a liberal, nominally religious environment. Bonhoeffer’s skill at the piano led some in his family to believe he was headed for a career in music. When he announced, at age 14, that he intended to become a minister and theologian, the family was not pleased.

He graduated from the University of Berlin in 1927, at the age of 21. Then he spent several months in Spain as an assistant pastor to a German speaking congregation. He returned to Germany to write a dissertation and then spent a year at New York’s Union Theological seminary as a guest lecturer. Then he returned to the University of Berlin as a professor.

During these years, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party were rising to power in Germany. As he gained power, Hitler’s anti-Semitic rhetoric and actions intensified. Some in the church—notably theologians such as Karl Barth and pastor Martin Niemoller--recognized the evil represented by Nazism and opposed it. Bonhoeffer joined them and others in organizing a Confessing Church, which published the Barmen Declaration in 1934 declaring that their first allegiance was to Jesus Christ. The statement read, in part: "We repudiate the false teaching that the church can and must recognize yet other happenings and powers, personalities and truths as divine revelation alongside this one Word of God. … "

This was in direct contrast to the state established, or Reich, Church, of the time. These churches fully bought in to Nazism—or were heavily pressured to do so. One German pastor at the time said: “The time is fulfilled for the German people of Hitler. It is because of Hitler that Christ, God the helper and redeemer, has become effective among us. … Hitler is the way of the Spirit and the will of God for the German people to enter the Church of Christ." Another pastor was even less subtle: "Christ has come to us through Adolph Hitler."

It did not take long for Bonhoeffer to draw the ire of the Nazis. In 1937 he published his classic book: “The Cost of Discipleship.” After the government banned him from teaching, he trained pastors in an underground seminary. When the seminary was discovered and closed, Bonhoeffer went to America to teach. But within months of his arrival in the relative safety of the States, he wrote a friend and said: “"I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."

Bonhoeffer even took the extraordinary step of joining the German Secret Service, which thought that his popularity as a religious lecturer would allow him to travel around Europe and feed back information about Germany’s enemies. Instead, he served as a double agent, using his travels to help Jews escape oppression and becoming connected to several assassination plots against Hitler.

Eventually his resistance efforts were discovered. On an April afternoon in 1943, two men arrived in a black Mercedes, put Bonhoeffer in the car, and drove him to Tegel prison. He spent two years in prison, corresponding with family and friends, pastoring fellow prisoners, and reflecting on the meaning of “Jesus Christ for today.” Eventually, Bonhoeffer was transferred from Tegel to Buchenwald and then to the extermination camp at Flossenbürg. On April 9, 1945, one month before Germany surrendered, he was hanged with six other resisters.

Today, Bonhoeffer is considered a Christian Martyr who resisted Nazism as best as he could and stood for Jesus above all.

In chapter 7 of the Cost of Discipleship Bonhoeffer made a statement that reflects his commitment to stand for Jesus, even in the midst of overwhelming pressure to sit down and be quiet. He wrote:

**Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow Him.**

***Not Private***Bonhoeffer’s story, and that quote, is a rather extreme example of the point I’m trying to make with our current sermon series. I’m calling it “Personal, not Private.” And the idea is that when we make a commitment to Jesus, that is a very personal, very intimate decision—but it is not a private one. Our commitment to Jesus must influence our relationships with others.

It is not something to keep hidden.

Let me put it this way: there’s something about the way I grew up that I think is pretty typical for this area. I’ve heard it described as a Dutch Heritage thing; I’ve heard it described as a Northwest Iowa thing; maybe it’s just a masculine thing. It’s this idea that we don’t get too expressive. That we don’t allow people to see very far under the surface. It’s this notion that we don’t, in general, talk about personal things.

And we’ve sort of classified a relationship with Jesus as a personal thing. When it comes to what Jesus means to me; or how a relationship with Jesus influences the way I live my life; we’ve made that deeply personal. And so, we’re not always comfortable talking about it. It’s fine if people know that I go to church. It’s fine if people see me as a person who tries to do the right thing. But talking about Jesus…that can be pretty hard. Uncomfortable even. “Not the way we do things.”

But here’s the thing: the Bible doesn’t say anything about keeping your relationship with Jesus private. Just the opposite, really. The Bible says that a commitment to Jesus will necessarily affect your relationship with others.

It affects our relationships in the church, where we are called to consider one another and challenge one another and meet together with one another and encourage one another. Being a follower of Jesus Christ calls us into a community.

And it affects our relationships outside of the church, in the world. As followers of Jesus we are called to share the message of Jesus with those who do not know Him yet. We are called to interact with the world in a way that demonstrates the good news of salvation and pushes back against the darkness.

What the Bible does not give us is the option of keeping our relationship with Jesus private. As Bonhoeffer says, a community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow Him.

And so, this is the theme for a little mini-series of sermons. This is the time of the year when we reset our vision for our church—where we talk about what it means for us to live out our commitment to Jesus as a part of this congregation that we call Hope Church, Spencer. And I want to cast our vision in this phrase: “Personal, not Private.” I want to challenge us to be a church which does not hide our commitment to Jesus.

Last week, we talked about what that means for our relationships within the church. This week I want to talk about what it means for our relationships with the world.

And our big idea for today is pretty simple. I can put it in three words: **Shine, don’t hide.** As followers of Jesus, as we interact with those who do not know Him yet, we are called to Shine, don’t hide.

***This Little Light of Mine***Our scripture passage this morning is one of the more well-known sayings of Jesus. It’s **Matthew 5:14-16,** a part of the Sermon on the Mount. Here’s what it says:

**14**“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.**15**Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. **16**In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

These verses get at the heart of what I mean when I say that our faith is personal, but it cannot be private. You can see that is precisely the point that Jesus is making. Don’t hide your light. Don’t cover it up. Let your light shine.

When we make a commitment to Jesus, we are called to share that commitment with people who do not know Him yet.

I want to break this saying of Jesus up into three parts. I’ll talk about 1) the statement of fact, 2) the warning, and 3) the command. Then, at the end I’ll have some practical suggestions for how we can shine, and not hide.

***It Comes with the Title***First, **the statement of fact. Jesus begins by telling us that we ARE the light**. The beginning of **verse 14:**

**14**“You are the light of the world.”

This is a statement of fact. Jesus is not saying that we must become the light. He’s not saying that we should work on generating some light that we can shine out to the world. He’s not even saying that He hopes we will be the light.

He’s saying: “You, yes you, ARE the light of the world.” This is something you already are. It’s not something to aspire to be, or to work to be, it’s an already-given reality.

At least, that is, if you are in the group of people included in the word “you.” So who is Jesus talking to here? Who is He calling the light of the world? Well, if you go back to the beginning of the chapter, Matthew 5:1, you see that this Sermon on the Mount is Jesus talking to “His disciples.” That is, these verses are specifically addressed to people who have made a commitment to follow Jesus. This is Jesus calling His disciples around Himself, looking them in the eye, and describing what they are.

So, if that’s you, if you are somebody who has made a commitment to follow Jesus—if you are one of Jesus’ disciples—then this statement of fact describes you. You ARE the light of the world. It’s not something you need to aspire to be; it’s not something to work up to; it is part of the job description that comes with the title of disciple of Jesus. It’s a matter of fact.

What does it mean? We’ve heard metaphor so much that we’re pretty familiar with it, but we might not always think about what it means. Light is a nearly universal religious symbol. Basically, light is good and darkness is bad. Light helps us to see the truth while darkness leads to error. Light is clean and pure, darkness covers up filth and evil. Light means salvation, darkness means condemnation. Throughout the Old Testament light is a symbol of God’s presence, and we are told that His light is the true light (Psalm 36:9).

Now, you might object that Jesus is the light of the world. Elsewhere in Scripture, He identifies Himself that way (John 8:12). Jesus is the One True Light. He is the way, the truth and the life. No other light can shine as brightly as Him.

But here, He says that His followers are the light. That we are meant to shine.

Clearly, He’s not suggesting that we can outshine Him, but rather that as His followers we are now reflecting the light He gives. One common way of thinking about this is the Sun and the moon. On its own, the moon doesn’t have any light of its own. But when it is lined up with the sun, it shines bright enough to be the brightest object in the night sky. Jesus is the Sun, we are the moon. We are meant to reflect Him. Another way to think of it, in more modern terms, is that Jesus is the power plant. He’s generating the electricity. And we, His followers, are like lamps. When we plug into the wall socket, when we tap into the power that Jesus gives, then we shine with His light.

We are the light of the world shining with the light of Jesus. That’s who we are. As disciples of Jesus, it’s part of the job description.

***Don’t Hide***Now, second, let’s look at **the warning. Jesus tells us to not cover up the light.** The second half of verse **14 and verse 15:**

A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.**15**Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

Don’t hide the light. Don’t cover it up.

There are two images here. On the one hand, Jesus talks about a town on a hill.

Jesus is putting forward a fairly obvious idea here. In that culture, whenever people clustered together to build cities or towns, one of their main motivations was defensive. The old belief that there is safety in numbers. So when you built a town, it was often surrounded by a wall, and people would make sure they were safely behind that wall when marauding tribes would come by in the dark of night. If defense was your concern, then, it wasn’t a bad idea to build your town in a valley, between the hills and among the trees, so it wouldn’t be so easy for the bad guys to find.

On the other hand, if you weren’t so worried about defense—or, if you were so confident about your strength—you’d build your town right at the top of the highest hill so people could see it for miles around. In fact, that’s exactly what King David did with the city of Jerusalem. He built his city on the highest hill and he built it out of white limestone that would gleam in the sun. He wanted people to know where Jerusalem was, he wanted people to be drawn to it. At night, when the surrounding countryside got dark, there would be so many lamps lit in Jerusalem that it would shine like a lighthouse.

The point is: you can’t hide a city like that; and Jesus doesn’t want His disciples to hide either. The idea is for them to shine brightly, to stand out, to draw people in. That was God’s prophetic purpose for Jerusalem in the Old Testament (Isaiah 2:2-5), and now it is Jesus’ purpose for His followers, the New Jerusalem.

And if that image doesn’t click, Jesus uses a second one: He pictures a homeowner lighting a lamp. In that culture, without electricity, this meant lighting a candle or an oil burning lamp. As the sun would set, you needed to burn a fire of some sort in order to see, or you just sat in the darkness.

But Jesus says it wouldn’t make any sense to light such a thing and then put a bowl over it. If you light a light, and then cover it up, you are just wasting it.

This makes me think of the flashlight app on my cell phone. One of the handiest things about a cellphone, in my opinion, is the flashlight app. You punch a button and the flash on the back of the phone becomes this bright light. It’s just so nice to always have a flashlight with me. I never know when I’m going to need to look under my desk, or the dog knocks something under the couch, or I’m looking up into the crawl space in my ceiling, and I just grab my cell phone and have instant light.

But sometimes, when I am putting my phone back in my pocket, I’ll accidently hit the flashlight button. Then I’ll be sitting there, and after awhile I’ll look down, and I’ll realize my pants are glowing. And then I’ll pull my phone out and realize the flashlight has been running all morning and my battery is nearly drained. It just doesn’t make sense for me to have the flashlight on and stick it in my pocket. It’s a waste.

So, Jesus’ point is: don’t cover up the light. You ARE the light of the world, don’t try to hide it. Don’t keep your relationship with Him private.

***Shine***Now, third, **the command.** **Jesus says that we must let our light shine before others**. This is the whole point of the passage in **verse 16:**

**16**In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Jesus is commanding us to let our light shine. Again, we don’t have to generate the light. If we are truly followers of Jesus then that light is already there. Our job is to not cover it up. Don’t keep it private. Don’t hide it. But let it shine. Let it be visible.

Where? Out there in the world. Before others. That’s Jesus’ way of talking about the people who are not disciples yet.

And our job, if we are disciples, is to let our light shine before these others. Out there in the world. We need to reflect the light of Jesus. To shine with the truth of the gospel. To exhibit the good news of grace and forgiveness and salvation. To stand up for what is right when the darkness is creeping in. Our faith is personal, but it is not private. Jesus is commanding us to let our light shine.

And specifically, what that looks like, is to do “good deeds.” One of the best ways for us to shine with the light of Jesus is to do “good deeds.” Those two words popped out at me this week, especially since in our passage last week, about being the church, we were called to spur one another on towards love and good deeds. In other words, one of the reasons we meet together here on a weekly basis is so that we can encourage and challenge one another to go back out into the world and do good deeds.

That includes telling people about Jesus, but more than that it means loving on people, and serving people, and being a positive influence in the community. It means volunteering and setting a Godly example and just generally being a shiny light in the midst of the surrounding darkness.

Ephesians 5:8-9 says that “the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth.” That’s how we shine. Goodness, righteousness, and truth. The word for “good” in “good deeds” in verse 16 is *kalos* and it means beautiful. It means morally beautifully. The things Jesus’ followers do are morally beautiful. They shine.

And notice what happens: people will see our good deeds and give praise to our Father in Heaven. That’s the goal, that people will bring glory to God. This isn’t about making a name for ourselves. This isn’t about having other people praising us for our kind and generous and sacrificial nature. Jesus talks about people who do “good deeds” for the praise it will bring them in the next chapter of Matthew, and He says those kinds of people get all their reward here (Matthew 6:1). Instead, our motivation should be to bring praise to our Father.

I take that to mean that some people will be led by our light to put their faith in Jesus as well. When we shine for Jesus, we may have the incredible privilege of helping others make a commitment to Him. That brings incredible praise to the Father.

But I also take it to mean that even if people do not cross the finish line of faith, they will be so impressed by the good things they see Christians doing that they won’t be able to help being glad that the Church is here. They’ll bless God because of the good they see Christians doing. And that is its own kind of wonderful witness.

The point Jesus is making, again, is that we must shine, not hide. Like Bonhoeffer, our personal faith in Jesus is too important to keep private. It must influence the way we interact with the world.

***Our Response***So there’s our assignment. Part of the job description of being a disciple of Jesus is to be the light of the world. We must shine for Jesus. Not cover it up.

As we conclude I want to leave you with a few suggestions for how we can do this

**Start Small.** Mother Theresa said: “Not everyone can do great things, but everyone can do small things with great love.” As Steve Sjogren says, “Small things done with great love will change the world.”

You don’t have to cure AIDS or solve world hunger or lead a stadium full of people to Jesus to make a difference. Just love the people around you. Go out of your way to serve your community. Show Jesus to people everyday.

Sjogren says that near the end of her life Mother Theresa was asked by a journalist how many poor souls she had carried off the streets of Calcutta. She estimated between 30,000 and 35,000. Shocked, the journalist asked, “How did you help so many?” Her answer: “If I hadn’t carried the first one, I couldn’t have carried the 30,000th.” In other words, we all have to start somewhere.

Second, **rub the right shoulders.** In other words, check who you know. If we want to help people get to know Jesus, we need to make sure we are creating relationships with people who don’t know Jesus.

For too many Christians, the longer we know Jesus the less we know people who have not met Him yet. The more time we spend in the church and with people from the church, the less we associate with people who have yet to meet Him.

And I can understand why this is the case—honestly, it’s pretty true in my life too—as we follow Christ our closest friends are those at the church and the people we’re comfortable being around are those who have the same values and beliefs we do and so on. But what happens is we live in this sort of Christian bubble where we don’t even have relationships with nonChristians anymore.

So we need to check who we are rubbing shoulders with. Build relationships with neighbors and people at work, parents of your kids’ friends and so on.

Third, **Love, Don’t Hate.** When you start talking about reaching people who don’t know Jesus you are inevitably talking about people involved in some morally questionable behaviors. People who don’t know Jesus are not likely to hold the same values that we do. And it’s pretty easy to start to hate people who are doing stuff that we know is wrong. Over the years, the Christian Church has done a pretty good job of lining up against people like that.

But here’s the thing: if they don’t know Jesus, why should it surprise us that they are engaged in sin? How can we expect them to give up the sin if nobody has loved them to Jesus?

If we’re going to love people like Jesus did, then it’s going to get messy. We should expect people to come to church with messy lives. The woman Jesus met at the well had a messy life. The woman brought to Him just caught in the act of adultery: messy. Matthew and Zaccheus the tax collectors: messy.

But Jesus didn’t hate those people, He loved them. And as He loved them, they found freedom from their sin.

So love, don’t hate. We’re not called to judge the people of the world. We’re called to love them. Acceptance is not approval. Just because we are willing to develop relationships with people who are far from God doesn’t mean we approve of everything they do.

And then, fourth and finally, **Don’t Wait.** Sometimes we don’t want to talk about Jesus with others because we know our lives aren’t what they should be yet. We’re afraid of being called hypocrites.

But the thing is: we don’t have to be all cleaned up to tell others about Jesus. If that were the case, none of us could ever talk about Him, because we are all still in process of being changed. What we need to do is tell our story, be honest about the things we struggle with, and point to the hope of salvation we have in Christ.

The point is for us to shine with the light of Jesus. Don’t keep it private. Do the good deeds of goodness, righteousness and truth. Point people towards the praise of your Father in heaven.