

The Church's Witness During A Pandemic

by Zac Poonen

This sermon emphasizes the church's role as a witness during the pandemic, focusing on being the light of the world as mentioned in Matthew 5:14. It highlights the shift from the Old Testament's emphasis on the written word to the New Testament's focus on manifesting the life of Jesus as the light. The importance of keeping a clear conscience, forgiving others, and seeking God's kingdom first is emphasized to be effective witnesses. The sermon also addresses trusting in God's provision and being a source of peace and faith in a time of fear and uncertainty.

Scripture: Matthew 5:14, Psalms 119:105, John 1:4, Acts 24:15, Matthew 6:33, John 1:17, Philippians 4:6

Topics: "Witnessing in Crisis", "Being the Light of the World"

Description

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Transcript

My subject is the church's witness during a time of pandemic, and we are in a time of pandemic now with COVID-19 around, but many of us in a lockdown situation. How are we to be a witness for Christ at this time? Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 and verse 14, you are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand it gives light to all who are in the house.

So to be a witness means to be a light. Now the question is, what is that light that we are to show the world? In the Old Testament, the light was the word of God. The Psalmist says in Psalm 119 verse 105, Thy word, O Lord, is a lamp to my feet and a light unto my path.

The word of God, the written word, the law and the prophets in the Old Testament, that was the word that the Israelites were supposed to show to the rest of the world. That was their witness. But in the New Testament, it's not just the written word.

It's more than that. Jesus said that he was the light of the world. And what was that light? We read in John chapter 1 and verse 4, In him was life, the life of God, and that life was the light of the world.

In him was life and that life was the light of men. So there's a shift now. It's not the written word that is to be the light in this time, in the new covenant age.

But the life of Jesus, that is the witness the church must have. The written word is important, but it says in John 1, the word became flesh. And so it is that written word when it is manifested in our flesh that we can be the light of the world.

Now very often the emphasis, when you think of the church fulfilling its mission, it's on the spoken word. Tell people about Jesus, that he died on the cross, that he rose up from the dead, that he can forgive your sins, that he's coming back in glory. We must be ready for him.

All that is good, but that's not the light. The word must be made flesh. The life of Jesus is the light of men.

So when people ask who is the light of the world, it's not enough to say Jesus is the light of the world, because Jesus said in John chapter 9 and verse 4, oh sorry, John 9 verse 5, while I am in the world, I am the light of the world. And when he left the world, he was not the light of the world thereafter. Thereafter, he said in Matthew 5, you are the light of the world.

Of course, it's the life of Christ within us that is the light, but we must not escape that obligation that Jesus has given to us. You are the light of the world, and that light as we saw in John 1 4 is the life of Jesus, not just the words of the gospel. So my dear brothers and sisters, that's the challenge that we need to take up.

Am I manifesting that light in my daily life, in my contact with my neighbors and friends and others? That is the witness of the church, and especially in a time of pandemic when people are worried and scared and anxious about many many things. The life of Jesus must be manifest in every one of us, and God is here to help us in that. I want you to turn to Luke's gospel in chapter 11, where we are told a little thing that we have to do in order to keep that light burning.

Luke 11 and verse 33, Jesus says, no one after lighting a lamp will put it away in a cellar but put it on a lampstand. And then in relation to our being a lamp that shines for the Lord, He says in Luke 11 34, the eye is the lamp of your body, and if your eye is clear, your whole body is full of light. But when it is bad, your body is full of darkness, and then we are no longer a witness.

Then watch out that the light in you does not become darkness. In verse 36, then when your whole body is full of light, it will be wholly illumined as when a lamp illumines a room. So what does that mean? What is the eye that Jesus spoke about? In our human body, it's the eye through which light comes in, and if you are blind, light does not come in.

The equivalent of that in our spiritual life is our conscience. When Jesus spoke about the eye, He was speaking about our conscience. If your conscience is clear, your whole body will be full of the life of Jesus.

But when your conscience is not clear, it'll be darkness. Darkness is our self-light. So the most important thing to make sure that the light is burning, that church is a true witness to Christ in this time of pandemic, is by keeping our conscience clear.

Very, very important. Now what does that mean? It means that as soon as you're convicted of some sin in your conscience, in words, in our thoughts, we confess it immediately. It's like the eye.

If you get a speck of dust in your eye, you put aside all your work and get rid of that. You wash away that eye immediately. That's what Jesus is referring to.

As soon as something comes in our conscience, we must immediately get rid of it by confessing it. And if you have hurt somebody, go and apologize to that person, ask forgiveness, and then come to the Lord and ask Him to forgive us. You know, the Lord is not going to forgive us if we have not asked forgiveness from somebody we have hurt.

Jesus said that when you come to the altar with your offering, and there you remember that somebody's got something against you, Matthew chapter 5, go and settle that first, and then come and bring your offering. Now when you come to the Lord and say, Lord, I've done something wrong, please forgive me. The Lord says, you hurt somebody, go and ask His forgiveness first.

And not only that, Jesus said, if you don't forgive others, God will not forgive you. So if I go to the Lord and ask Him to forgive me, the Lord says, have you forgiven everybody? You remember in the Lord's prayer He taught us to pray, forgive us our sins as we forgive others. So this is very important.

To keep our conscience clear means, in the most elementary level, I must ask forgiveness from anyone whom I have hurt. It could be your husband, it could be your wife, could be a neighbor, it could be a fellow worker, it could be anybody, it could be a brother or sister in the church. If you come with your offering to God, and you remember there that someone has got something against you, settle that first, and then come and give your offering.

Very clear in Matthew 5, verse 24 onwards. Take time to read it sometime. And the second thing is, Matthew 6, verse 15 and 16, if you don't forgive others, 14 and 15, if you don't forgive others, your Heavenly Father will not forgive you.

That's clear. In other words, if I come and say, Lord, I confess my sin to you, and the Word of God says, if we confess our sins, the blood of Jesus will cleanse me from all sin. No, it will not.

If you have not forgiven others, it will not. Because that's very clear in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 6. If you do not forgive others, your Heavenly Father will not forgive you, Matthew 6, verse 15, no matter how much you pray. So now we're talking about being a light.

Keep the eye clear. Keep your conscience clear. Otherwise, trying to share the Gospel with others, just with words, is an empty ritual.

So this is the first thing that we must bear in mind, that we need to ask ourselves. Is my conscience clear? Have I asked forgiveness from everyone whom I hurt? Have I forgiven everyone who has hurt me, or who's hurt my family? That's the first step. Now I want to turn to Luke's Gospel in chapter 15, where Jesus speaks about, you know, bringing the lost sheep.

The Church's mission is to bring the lost sheep back into the fold. This is the Church's witness and mission, going to all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature he who believes and is baptized will be saved. Luke 15, Jesus speaks about a man who's had a hundred sheep, in verse 4, and he's lost one of them.

You know the story. He leaves the 99 in the open pasture and goes after that one sheep until he finds it. And when he finds it, he carries the sheep on his shoulder and brings the sheep back.

And then he explains the meaning of this. It's very important to understand the meaning of it. We say that one lost sheep is a lost sinner, but who are the 99? Where is that sheep going to be brought into? What sort of a church is that sheep going to be asked to come and join? You see here in Luke 15 and verse 7, when he talks about the sheep being brought back, he says, there'll be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

That's the lost sheep, a sinner who needs to repent, to turn from known sin. That's repentance. More than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

How does Jesus define the 99 sheep who are in the fold? They are 99 righteous people who need no repentance. So when you ask yourself whether your church is a good fold into which a lost sheep can be brought, that's the question. The church's mission to bring that lost sheep into the fold.

So we need to ask ourselves what type of fold is this in which that sheep is going to be brought. It must be full of, like it says in Luke 15 and 7, righteous people who need no repentance. Not perfect people.

There are no perfect people on the earth. None of us are like Jesus. We are trying, pressing on to be like him.

But there is a type of person who can be called a righteous person who needs no repentance. Why doesn't he need repentance? Because as soon as he's aware of something, he confesses it immediately. He repents and confesses it.

If he does not confess and does not repent of the sin he's convicted of in his conscience, then he needs repentance. That means he's a person who doesn't keep his conscience clear. His eye is not clear.

Then his whole body is full of darkness. Then he's not the light of the world. He's darkness and he's failed in his mission.

So a church that is full of people who are not repenting is a church that's totally failed in being the light of the world. Do you understand that? That every person who claims to be a part of the church must fulfill his responsibility to be a person who needs no repentance because he's constantly repenting whenever he fails. I hope you've understood that.

I want to repeat it so clearly because some of you have probably never heard this before. The church is described by Jesus as 99 righteous people who do not need any repentance. Can you say, my brother, sister, I want to ask you very lovingly that you're a person who does not need any repentance.

For many years in my Christian life, after I was born again, that was not true in my life. I would slip up somewhere and I'd say, okay, well, we'll deal with it later or if I had a grudge against somebody, I would keep it and not settle it before the Lord. If I hurt somebody, I'd say, okay, when I get an opportunity, I'll settle it with him and ask his forgiveness.

But it was not something I'd do immediately. And I would retain the memory and grudges against people that hurt me. Imagine, I was born again, but I didn't take my Christian life seriously.

But I got fed up of that defeated life. And I said, Lord, I want a genuine Christian life. And after a number of years after I was born again, I was seeking God to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit came and filled my heart and the light of God flooded my heart. And I began to see sin in the horrible thing it was, that it was my sin that crucified Jesus on the cross. And I began to hate it.

And an unforgiving spirit was a sin, was a sin. I hated it. An unforgiving attitude was a sin that I hated.

And I said, Lord, I don't want to have an unforgiving attitude towards anyone. And if I hurt someone, I want to immediately settle it. I want to keep my heart free from sin.

Then I began on this path of living a life where I don't need any repentance. Not that I never slipped up, but as soon as I slipped up, I would immediately settle it with God and with man. You know, that's how the Apostle Paul lived.

I want you to, I'm going to read you a verse in Acts chapter 24. This is the secret of his effective life. And we can live like that too.

Acts chapter 24 and verse 15 and 16. In verse 15, Acts 24 verse 15, he says, I know certainly that there will be a resurrection of the righteous and of the wicked. No doubt in my mind about it.

And in view of this, since there is going to be a resurrection of the righteous and the wicked, and I want to be in the resurrection of the righteous, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to keep my conscience blameless at all times before God and before man. I'm going to keep my conscience blameless before God and before man.

That's how he lived. Always, the word always means 24-7. He says, that's how I know that I'll be in the resurrection of the righteous.

99 righteous people who don't need repentance. And the resurrection of these righteous people. Paul said, the only way I can be there is not by saying, well, 20 years ago I accepted Christ.

But have you, how have you lived since then? Have you lived a careless life in your conscience? Then be sure, be careful, my brother, sister, whether you'll really be in the resurrection of the righteous. I'm not trying to scare you. I'm trying to just quote scripture.

There will certainly be a resurrection of the righteous, and I want to be in it. In view of this, Acts 24-16, I keep my conscience 24-7 without blame before God and before man. So this is the secret of being a light that's shining all the time.

That is our calling, to be the light of the world, to be the light in the area where you are. And the light comes from God. In the olden days, it was not electric like they had.

They lit their lamps, and oil was needed to keep that lamp burning. And that's a picture of the Holy Spirit that comes and makes the light of Christ burn within us. But the Holy Spirit can remain burning within us like a burning fire only if we keep our conscience clear 24-7.

So don't discard this as unimportant. This is the most important thing in your Christian life. You are the light of the world, and Jesus said, take care that that light does not become darkness.

That's a warning that we need to take care, take heed to at this particular time. So when we think of our particular witness in relation to the anxiety and tension that people are facing at this time, for example, there is the fear that many people have, will the sickness come to me? Will I die? Here is where we need to believe in a loving Heavenly Father. That's part of our witness.

The folks in the world don't have a loving Heavenly Father, but we do. And Jesus always said, if you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him? We have every right to go to our Heavenly Father and ask him for good things, to ask him to protect us in a time of pandemic. And I like this wonderful promise in Psalm 91.

It's very relevant to the time in which we live. I'm sure many people are quoting it, but it says in Psalm 91 that if you dwell in the secret shelter of the shadow of the Almighty, under the shelter of the Most High, it says in Psalm 91 you will not be afraid of the plague that comes in darkness, verse 6, or the destruction, Psalm 91, 6, that lays a lot of people down. A thousand may fall on your side and ten thousand at your right hand.

It will not approach you. That's the promise we believe in. Our Heavenly Father, I'm not saying our Heavenly Father will not allow us to be sick.

No, I don't preach that, but I believe he cares for us. And I believe that he makes every single thing work together for our good. Even if there's a sickness which he doesn't take away immediately, he'll make it work for our good.

Romans 8, 28. God makes everything work for our good. And the Apostle Paul, he had a sickness.

We read in 2 Corinthians 12, a thorn in his flesh. He prayed three times. And God said, I'm not going to take it away.

There are sicknesses God doesn't take away. But he says there's a purpose with it. If God allows his sickness to remain, it will be with a purpose.

And the purpose is, Paul, I want to keep you humble. And God used that thorn in Paul's flesh to keep him humble. So God may permit that, but otherwise we believe that God will not allow us to be tested beyond our ability.

And he will make everything work together for our good. And that is part of the light that we had to manifest to the world around in a time of pandemic. That we have no fear.

You know the words that were very frequently on Jesus' lips whenever he spoke to the disciples was, fear not. Don't sin and don't be afraid. Fear not, fear not.

Sin not, fear not. Those are the words that he most frequently spoke to people. I don't want you to sin and I don't want you to be afraid.

We need to be, we need to avoid fear as much as we need to avoid sin. Because fear is the opposite of faith. And when I live in fear, I'm manifesting thereby.

I don't believe that I have a loving Father in heaven who cares for me. We have wonderful promises in scripture. And in a time of pandemic, we must be a witness to those we meet by showing them that we have a Father in heaven who cares for us.

Who cares for our children. Who cares for every need. We don't have the answer to every problem.

But we certainly believe that God cares for us. The other fear that people have is, well will I have enough money to make it through this time? I'll tell you one thing. And I believe this with all my heart.

I remember when my wife and I first started serving the Lord 52 years ago, we were very, very poor. We were so poor we did not even have money to rent a place to live. I was serving the Lord.

I'd given up my job in the Navy. I'd given away all my savings for the Lord's work. And we would not tell anybody about our needs.

And we were working among villagers and students. I said, Lord, I'm going to trust you. The promise I trusted was Matthew 6, 33, if you seek God's kingdom first, all that you need of food, clothing, and shelter will be provided for you.

I trusted the Lord for that 52 years ago, my wife and I. And I want to testify that all these years he's provided for us. We've never made our needs known to a single human being in these 52 years. We've never sent prayer letters asking people to support us.

God has provided all our need. He's helped us to educate our children, to take care of our family all these years. I wanted to prove that God is a loving Father.

And I've experienced that all these years. And I want to share my testimony with you. I want to say to you, my dear brothers, sisters, the same promise is in your Bible.

Seek the kingdom of God first and all these other things will be added to you. Don't worry, Matthew 6, 31. What shall we eat? Where shall we get food in this time of pandemic? Where will we get money? All the people in the world eagerly seek out these things.

They are worried about these things. But your heavenly Father, Matthew 6, 32, knows that you need these things. So you seek the kingdom of God.

If you want to be anxious about something, Jesus said, be anxious about the kingdom of God, that you live a life that glorifies God in your life. Seek the Father. Seek to glorify Him in your life.

The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Seek for that and say, Lord, that's what I want for my life. And you can be absolutely sure that God will keep His promise that He'll provide all your need.

Now, we may think that's a very simplistic answer. It is not. For 2,000 years, many, many people, beginning with the first apostles, have proved the truth of that promise that all those who honor God, God honors them.

All those who seek God's kingdom, God provides for them. And I believe this was my desire for myself when I started my Christian life and I started serving the Lord. I said, Lord, I want to come to the end of my life and be a living demonstration at the end of my life.

But I spent my life seeking God's kingdom first, and God provided all my needs. And I want to say that should be your desire, too. Lord, help me to be such a witness for you, a light that shines in the dark world so that people look at my life and see that I have a Father in heaven who cares for me.

That is the witness of the church. That is how Jesus was. It says Jesus explained the Father, we read in John 1 and verse 17 and 18.

He explained the Father by His life. He manifested in all situations, I have a Father in heaven who cares for me. There were times when people came to capture Him.

No, they couldn't touch Him because it says, Our and not yet come. The Father would not allow it. And this is our Father, too.

So, my dear brothers and sisters, I trust that we shall really see God in these days repent of our unbelief and say, Lord, I want to trust you to provide my need. I don't know how you do it, but you provide my need. And I want to keep my conscience absolutely clear.

There's a close connection between keeping a good conscience and having faith. You cannot have faith if your conscience is bad. The Bible says if you regard iniquity in your heart, the Lord will not hear you.

It's possible for the weakest one among you to be a bold witness for Christ at this time of pandemic, to let the light of the life of Jesus shine through you. And I want to encourage you to do that. Open your heart and say, Lord, I want to open my being from this time onwards to seek your kingdom first.

And again, let me say, begin with keeping your conscience clear. Forgive everyone who has hurt you. You can't remove the memory of what people have done to you from your mind.

That's not possible, but you can exercise your will and say, I forgive them. And if you hurt somebody at the earliest opportunity, call them up, write a note or something and say, please forgive me. These are the two important things, forgiving others and asking forgiveness, because I find with many, many believers, they're careless in this area and their conscience is not clear.

The light becomes darkness. So what is the witness of the church in the last days? To demonstrate the life of Jesus, you are the light of the world. And we do demonstrate that to the world around so that people can be drawn to Christ.

The Bible says, be anxious for nothing, but in everything, make your requests known to God. That's part of being the light. May God help you all.

Let us pray. So while our heads are bowed in prayer, I want to ask you to consider for just for a moment, is there anybody you have not forgiven? Right now, say to the Lord, Lord, I forgive that person and that other person and other person. And I wish them good.

I don't wish any evil for them. Is there anybody who you need to ask forgiveness from, whom you can think of, whom you hurt? Say, Lord, I want to go and settle it. I want to call up that person and ask his forgiveness.

The time is short. Keep your conscience clear. Heavenly Father, we pray that these words will not be removed from our hearts, but will remain there and produce fruit for eternity.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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