

## **Shining As Lights in the World**

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**P**aul lived “in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation” (Phil. 2:15), a description he would probably use if he lived in our world. What an opportunity this presents to us! If we shine a flashlight in the daytime, it goes largely unnoticed. But if we shine it at midnight, it attracts attention. A godly life stands out in a workplace or classroom where there is filthy talk, racy dress, low morals and sour faces.

A shining light is a familiar Biblical image. The word “light” (various forms) is found 296 times in Scripture. “Shine” (various forms) is found 52 times. God made light in the beginning (day, Gen. 1:5; and the sun, moon, stars, Gen. 1:16-17). God is light (1 John 1:5). His Word is a light unto our path (Psa. 119:105). Intelligently, the knowledge of God is light. Morally, the holiness of God is light. Physically, the glory of God is light.

John the Immerser was a “burning and shining light” (John 5:35). Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12). The gospel shines in a dark place (2 Pet. 1:19; 1 John 2:8). Christians are the children of light (Eph. 5:8), whose light is set on a candlestick for the world to see (Matt. 5:14-16).

We must not be afraid to be seen—to stand out. “Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee” (Isa. 60:1). [All Scripture references are taken from the King James Version unless

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otherwise noted.] Paul wrote that we are to have “no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Eph. 5:11). One preacher warned a young man in the congregation who was joining worldly company that this crowd would be a bad influence on him. Furthermore, he warned that they would persecute him for being a Christian. The boy rejected his counsel. Months later, he saw the boy and asked if his friends had been mistreating him. The boy said that his experience had been “nothing but pleasant.”

The preacher asked, “You mean they haven’t persecuted you for being a Christian?”

He replied, “Nope! As a matter of fact, they haven’t even found out!”

This young man’s light had been under a bushel. How can I make sure that “this little light of mine” is not under a bushel but shining “all around the neighborhood”? Paul wrote,

For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Do all things without murmurings and disputings: that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life...” (Phil. 2:13-16)

## **DON’T PUT YOUR CANDLE UNDER THE BUSHEL OF A BAD ATTITUDE.**

To shine, we must be “without murmurings and disputings” (Phil. 2:14). “Murmuring” means “whispering” or “muttering.” It speaks of private complaining – what we usually call grumbling. One of the most unbecoming things a Christian can be is a chronic

complainer, always finding fault, never contented, never happy. Someone observed, "The more that we grumble the less we can glow. The more we complain the less we can shine. The more that we argue the less we can augment Christ."

A monk entered a monastery in which he agreed to take a vow of silence. He could only speak two words every ten years. After the first ten years he was brought before the leader. He said, "Bed hard." Ten years later he was brought before the leader again. He said, "Food bad." Ten years later he was brought before the leader again. He said, "I quit." The leader said, "Well it doesn't surprise me. You haven't done anything but complain for the last 30 years."

Am I the type of person who never seems to speak unless it is a word of complaint, either about my life or about someone else, or the church? Have I done "nothing but complain for the last thirty years"? (Or, thirty days?) All of us have our complaints from time to time but some are constant complainers. Complainers are seldom difference makers; usually they are on the sidelines criticizing those who are making a difference.

### **DON'T PUT YOUR CANDLE UNDER THE BUSHEL OF BAD ACTIONS.**

A bald-headed merchant was standing at his shop door. A Scotchman stopped and inquired if he had any hair-restorer. "Yes, sir; step inside. Here's an article I can recommend. Testimonials are many from men who have used it. It makes the hair grow in twenty-four hours."

"Aweel," said the Scotchman, "ye can gie the top o' your own head a bit rub wi't; and I'll look round the morn, and see if ye're telling the truth." This homely story illustrates a widely recognized fact—example is more

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convincing than precept. A bad example can put out the light of many words. A sixteen-year-old boy quit attending church services. His explanation was: "My parents have attended church for forty years, and it has not done much for them; so why should I continue?" This might be your son!

### **To shine, we must be "without disputings" (Phil. 2:14).**

Pride and anger are the proud parents of disputations (Prov. 13:10; 15:18; 1 Tim. 6:3). Conceived in lust (Jas. 4:1), doted on in infancy (1 Tim. 6:4), nourished on ignorance (1 Tim. 6:4), it grows to be a vicious animal (biting and devouring, Gal. 5:15). Carnality, vain glory and envy are its siblings (2 Cor. 3:3-5; Gal. 5:26). Its offspring includes "confusion and every evil work" (Jas. 3:16), including "envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings" (1 Tim. 6:4).

Disputing, unfortunately, is common even among God's people. The disciples disputed among themselves even while Jesus was nearby (Mark 9:33-34). Paul and Barnabas had "no small dissension and disputation" with certain Judaizing teachers, which led to "much disputing" at the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:2, 7). Paul and Barnabas had a sharp contention between themselves which jettisoned their planned joint mission effort (Acts 15:39). There were "contentions" and "debates" among the Christians in the Corinth church of Christ (1 Cor. 1:10-12; 2 Cor. 12:20).

We are to be careful not to have "doubtful disputations" with a weak brother (Rom. 14:1). We are to withdraw ourselves from one that "dotes about questions and strifes of words" who fosters "perverse disputings" (1

Tim. 6:3-5). It is clear to see, then, that “the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (Jas. 1:20).

**To shine, we must be “harmless.”**

Robertson says that the word occurs only in three other verses in the New Testament: Matthew 10:16; Philippians 2:15 and Romans 16:19 (translated “sincere”) (442).

**(1) To be harmless, we must be sincere.** This is the more literal definition found in the margin. It translates a Greek word (*akeraios*) which means “that which is unmixed or unadulterated.” The idea is used of wine without water and of metal without alloy. A person who is sincere has no mixed motives or double intention. “What you see is what you get.” The Bible calls this trait “singleness of heart” (Acts 2:46; Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22). Jesus referred to it with the unusual phrase, “if thine eye be single” (Matt. 6:22), which means “a steady eye, directed to one object.” We use a similar idea when we are having eye trouble and say, “I’m seeing double,” referring to blurriness or confusion.

God has always required sincerity and hated hypocrisy. “Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth” (Josh. 24:14). Jesus detested the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and often called them on it (cf. Matt. 23). Paul dealt with some insincere preachers (Phil. 1:16), who were a mental weight to him. Paul practiced careful sincerity in his own walk with God (Acts 24:16; 2 Cor. 2:17) and desired that all Christians “be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:10; cf. Eph. 5:27). He even asked the Corinthians to prove their sincerity (2 Cor. 8:8).

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**(2) To be harmless, we must be guileless.** This is the kind of person you can trust never to injure you. Jesus had this characteristic (Heb. 7:26).

**(3) To be harmless, we must be simple.** Paul says he would have us “simple concerning evil” (Rom. 16:19). This does not mean that Christians should be gullible and fall for deception (the kind of “simple” found in Romans 16:18). Jesus said we are to be as “wise as serpents” (Matt. 10:16). Snakes are known to be cunning. The Egyptians used the serpent in their hieroglyphics as a symbol of wisdom. In the context of Matthew 10:16, Jesus is saying to His disciples that they should be careful to avoid danger. As Barnes notes, “No animal equals a snake in the rapidity and skill which they evince in escaping danger.” The devil and his agents have a particular spite against flourishing churches and flourishing souls. The ship that is known to be richly laden is most exposed to privateers. The adversary and enemy covets such a prey, therefore look to yourselves (2 John 1:8) (Henry, comments on Romans 16:19).

Jesus also said we are to be as “harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Doves are a symbol of innocence. This refers to a child of God’s “holy simplicity” – what we might call being naïve about worldly ways. Perhaps a better way to say it is: innocent and inexperienced in sin. This person is not conniving or contriving. It is what Paul had in mind when he commanded “in malice be you children” (1 Cor. 14:20). Satan tries to corrupt our minds “from the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3). Paul described his own lifestyle among the Corinthians as “in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God” (2 Cor. 1:12).

**To shine, we must be “without rebuke.”**

This means “without blame; never giving occasion for anyone to complain about you” (cf. 1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23; 2 Pet. 3:14). Zacharias and Elisabeth had this trait (Luke 1:6). Elders and deacons are to be “blameless” (1 Tim. 3:2, 10). Some will always look for an opportunity to pervert what Christians do and say; we must not give them any ammunition to use against us (Tit. 2:8). Jesus wants to present us to the Father as “holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight” (Col. 1:22). Robertson points out, “These three adjectives give a marvelous picture of complete purity (positive and negative, internal and external)” (482-483).

Jesus wants a beautiful bride on His wedding day. (His bride is the church, which, of course is composed of its members—you and me.) He wants her to be without spot (Eph. 5:27; cf. 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Pet. 3:14). A *spot* is a visible blemish. Any obvious character flaw that we have that others can observe disfigures Jesus’ bride. Jesus also wants His bride to be without wrinkle. Spots represent defilement from the outside, while wrinkles are caused by internal decay. A “wrinkled bride” is an incongruity. The Jews were extraordinarily careful in their washings of purification. They were careful that there should be no wrinkle to keep the flesh from the water, and no spot nor dirt which was not thoroughly washed.

Two boys walking through the woods came upon a big deep hole. “Wow, that looks deep,” one ventured.

The other responded, “Sure does. Let’s toss a few pebbles in and see how deep it is.” They picked up some gravels and threw them in. They waited. No noise. “Wow! That is *really* deep. Here, throw some of these great big rocks down there. We should hear them hit the bottom.”

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They picked up a couple of football-sized rocks and tossed them into the hole and waited. Again, nothing!

They looked at each other in amazement. One got a determined look on his face and said, "Hey, over here in the weeds there's a railroad tie. Help me carry it over. When we toss *that* thing in, it's *gotta* make some noise." The two dragged the heavy tie over to the hole and heaved it in. Not a sound came from the hole. Suddenly, out of the nearby woods a goat appeared, running like the wind. It rushed toward the two boys, then right past them, running as fast as its legs could carry it. Suddenly it leaped in the air and into the hole. The two boys were astonished. Then, out of the woods came a farmer who spotted the boys and ambled over. "Hey, have you two guys seen my goat out here?" he asked.

"You bet we did! Craziest thing I've ever seen! It came running like crazy and just jumped into this hole!"

"Nah," says the farmer, "That couldn't have been *my* goat. My goat was chained to a railroad tie."

The point is: *if you choose to jump into a hole, others will follow.* If you follow Christ, you'll take people to heaven with you. If you don't, they will follow you in the other direction.

People will notice (1 Tim. 4:12). Paul said Timothy had "professed a good profession before many witnesses" (1 Tim. 6:12). Luke pointed out that Timothy "was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium" (Acts 16:1-2).

## **DON'T PUT YOUR CANDLE UNDER THE BUSHEL OF BAD WORDS.**

A squirrel climbed on the Metro-North Railroad power lines near New York City. This set off an electrical surge, which weakened an overhead bracket, which let a



wire dangle toward the tracks, which tangled in a train, which tore down all the lines. As a result, 47,000 commuters were stuck in Manhattan for hours that evening. Such a small cause had such a big effect. James teaches us that one of the smallest parts of the body – the tongue – can cause a lot of damage (Jas. 3:5-6).

**Bad words can ruin our religion (Jas. 1:26).**

A bad mouth can ruin our reputation with man and our standing with God. Sir Thomas Fuller (1608-1661) said, “Birds are entangled by their feet and men by their tongues.” We must bridle the tongue with self-control before others bridle it for us. “Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding: whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee” (Psa. 32:9). A sentence may seem like a small thing, but it can lead to big results.

**Bad words can lead to condemnation (Jas. 3:1-2).**

Solomon said, “He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction” (Prov. 13:3).

“The boneless tongue, so small and weak,  
Can crush and kill,” declares the Greek.

“The tongue destroys a greater horde,”  
The Turk asserts, “than does the sword.”

The Persian proverb wisely saith,  
“A lengthy tongue – an early death!”

Or sometimes takes this form instead,  
“Don’t let your tongue cut off your head.”

“The tongue can speak a word whose speed,”  
Say the Chinese, “outstrips the steed.”

The Arab sages said in part,  
“The tongue’s great storehouse is the heart.”

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From Hebrew was the maxim sprung,  
"Thy feet should slip, but ne'er the tongue."  
The sacred writer crowns the whole,  
"Who keeps the tongue doth keep his soul."

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) said, "A slip of the foot you may soon recover, but a slip of the tongue you may never get over."

### **Bad words can lead to unpleasant consequences.**

We may have to eat our words. David's son said, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof" (Prov. 18:21). Be careful with words, for they have consequences. Just five words cost Zacharias nine months' silence (Luke 1:20).

You have a little prisoner  
He's nimble, sharp, and clever,  
He's sure to get away from you  
Unless you watch him ever.  
And when he once gets out he makes  
More trouble in an hour,  
Than you can stop in many a day  
Working with all your power.  
Quick, fasten tight the ivory gates  
And chain him while he's young!  
For this same dangerous prisoner  
Is just your little Tongue.

### **Bad words are sinful.**

Chaucer wrote, "The first virtue, son, if you will learn, is to restrain and keep well thy tongue." Solomon said, "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise" (Prov. 10:19). Since the tongue is capable of many sins, the more we use it, the more likely we are to sin. Someone noted, "God gave two ears which are always open and one tongue surrounded by two rows of teeth, which should give some indication

as to what He intended." Both Diogenes and Zeno are credited with saying, "We have two ears and only one tongue in order that we may hear more and speak less." Another observed, "Even a fish would stay out of trouble if he kept his mouth shut."

Perhaps the tongue is second only to the hand in the number of sins it can commit. The Bible lists at least fifteen sins we can commit with our tongue:

**(1) Taking God's name in vain (Ex. 20:7).** God's name is taken in vain by using it flippantly. Many people use God's name in everyday speech without thinking at all about what they are saying.

You may sport with the whirlwind and trifle with the storm, you may lay your hand upon the lion's mane and play with the leopard's spots, you may go to the very crater of the burning volcano, and laugh at the lava which it belches out in thunder: you may trifle with any and everything; but trifle not with God. Let there be one holy thing upon which you dare not lay a profane hand, and let that be the name of God. (Exell 2:359)

God's name is taken in vain by using euphemisms. A euphemism is "the substitution of a word or phrase less offensive or objectionable." Some common euphemisms include: Lordy or Lawe me, which refers to the Lord; Gee Whiz, Jeez, or Gee, which is a euphemistic contraction of the name of Jesus; Gosh, Golly, Gad, Egad, for God; Good gracious, Good grief, My Goodness, Goodness knows, For Goodness sake, and Thank Goodness are all mild forms of oaths and are used euphemistically for God. Heavens, Good heavens, For heaven's sake, all call on heaven to witness the truth (cf. Matt. 23:22). Darn, Dang, Dern, simply mean, "damn." Dickens and Deuce are used for the

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devil. Heck means hell. (References for this include: Webster's New World Dictionary; Webster's Unabridged Dictionary; American English Usage; Nicholson, Funk & Wagnalls Practical Dictionary; Webster's New Intercollegiate Dictionary.)

**(2) Cursing/profanity (Ex. 22:28; Jas. 3:10; 2 Pet. 2:10; Jude 8).** Paul Harvey says, "Profanity is insanity." It is a prayer to God to carry out a curse of revenge, but Jesus said to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44; Rom. 12:14). We are to love our neighbor, not curse our neighbor (Matt. 22:39). God wants all to be saved and not to be doomed (1 Tim. 2:4; Ezek. 33:11; 2 Pet. 3:9). We should never wish another to be damned – we should wish them to be saved (cf. Mark 16:16).

**(3) Flattery (Psa. 12:2-3).** It is good to compliment, but it is sinful to flatter. Jesus never flattered anyone, but He did compliment five people. He said that Nathaniel was one "in whom is no guile" (John 1:47). Of the Roman centurion He said, "I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel" (Matt. 8:5-10). Of His cousin, John the Baptist, He said, "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11). He complimented a poor widow on her giving (Mark 12:41-44). He complimented the woman who anointed His feet with costly oil and wiped them with her hair (John 12:1-8). Thus, Jesus complimented people for honesty, faith, fearless preaching, liberality and doing good works.

On the other hand, Jesus never flattered. Others tried to flatter him (Matt. 22:16), but He never did the same. To have done so would have been to violate the Old Testament and His own law. "A man that flattereth his neighbour spreadeth a net for his feet" (Prov. 29:5; cf. 20:19; 26:28; 28:23). Job resisted the temptation of flattery (Job 17:5; 32:22). Paul never "at any time used...flattering

words" (1 Thess. 2:5). We must give care to avoid this form of sinful speech.

**(4) Evil speaking/frowardness (Eph. 4:31; Jas. 4:11; Prov. 4:24; 8:8, 13; 1 Tim. 6:5; 1 Pet. 2:1).** Paul wrote, "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man" (Col. 4:6). "Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile" (Psa. 34:13).

**(5) Lying/deceit (Rev. 21:8; Prov. 6:17-19; Rom. 3:13; Eph. 4:25).** The ninth commandment says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" (Ex. 20:16).

**(6) Talebearing (Prov. 26:20).** Gossip is dangerous (Prov. 20:19; 11:13; 2 Cor. 12:20) because it wounds (Prov. 18:8, 21; Psa. 41:7), separates friends (Prov. 17:9; 16:28), sows strife and digs up evil (Prov. 16:27), ensnares the gossip's own soul (Prov. 18:7), and is classed with the worst of evils (Rom. 1:28-32). According to the National Opinion Research Center, 29 percent of adults say their privacy has been violated by gossiping neighbors (Cited in *American Demographics*, 1995).

**(7) Harsh criticism/reviling (Matt. 5:22; 1 Cor. 6:10).** A good statement to remember is: "To belittle is to be little." One woman committed suicide and left an unfinished note that simply said, "They said..." Whatever "they said" had bothered her enough that she thought life was not worth living.

**(8) Whispering (Rom. 1:29).**

**(9) Boasting (Rom. 1:30).**

**(10) Backbiting (Psa. 15:1-3; Rom. 1:30; Gal. 5:15).**

**(11) Speaking idle words/foolish talking (Matt. 12:26; cf. 1 Tim. 5:13; Eph. 5:4).** A farmer came to town one day and asked the owner of a restaurant if he could use a million frog legs. The owner asked where he could get that

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many frogs. "I've got a pond at home just full of them," the farmer replied. "They drive me crazy night and day." After they made an agreement for several hundred frogs, the farmer went back home. He came back a week later with two scrawny frogs and a foolish look on his face. "I guess I was wrong," he stammered. "There were just two frogs in the pond, but they sure were making a lot of noise." The next time you hear a lot of noise about how bad things are at church, just remember it may be nothing more than a couple of chronic complainers who have little to do but grouch and croak!

**(12) Filthy speech/jesting (Col. 3:8; Eph. 4:29; 5:4).**

**(13) False teaching (Tit. 1:11).**

**(14) Blasphemy (Col. 3:8; cf. Psa. 119:20; Matt. 12:24-37; Mark 3:28-30; Luke 11:14-26; Lev. 24:16).**

**(15) Frivolous oath-taking (Lev. 19:12; Deut. 23:21; Matt. 5:33-37).** We should be slow to speak in order to keep the respect of others. Someone said, "He who thinks by the inch and talks by the yard will likely be moved by the foot." James wrote, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (Jas. 1:19).

Stephen Pile told of a man who lit a fire in his grate and went outside to get more coal. Upon returning, he noted that a log had rolled out of the grate and set the log box on fire. He picked up the burning box and hurried to throw it out into his yard. As he did, he brushed the curtain that covered the front door.

Upon returning, he noted that the curtain and the door were in flames. While phoning the fire station, he also noticed that the log box he had thrown out into the yard had set fire to his car. He rushed out with a bucket of water, but in the process, he tripped over a gasoline can which splashed gas on him and the surrounding area. By

then a neighbor had called the fire station. By the time the firemen arrived, they found the entire place aflame, including the man who started it all, who was trying to leap out of his clothes.

Somewhere in this account, there is a lesson for us about what James 3 says about the tongue. So often our speech misfires and becomes a raging, uncontrolled agent of destruction never intended. We should be slow to speak.

## CONCLUSION

Light is powerful. Doctors now do surgery with light. Your influence as a Christian is powerful. When Jesus said the disciples were the light of the world, they appeared to be nobodies: uneducated, unknown, no power base and no worldly position of influence. The Greeks were known world-wide for their superior knowledge, architecture, art and philosophy. Aristotle, Plato and Socrates had already given their teachings centuries before Jesus told this unassuming group of men that they were the light of the world!

Yet, who is better known now? Who has more influence? Jesus, His apostles and their words.

In the ancient athletic games, the runner who won the race was not necessarily the fastest, but the first to finish with his torch still burning. The devil is blowing the winds of doubt, distress and despair in the direction of our Christian lights. Keep your torch alive; the finish line is almost in sight.

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