

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
Dr. Jay Howell
September 27, 2020

“Falling Short: The Good Thing about Bushels”
Matthew 5:13-17

Today we are wrapping up this series “Falling Short,” so let me offer a word on what’s coming up in the next few weeks. Next Sunday, October 4, we will be blessed to welcome back two of our international mission partners Linda and Fawzy Attia who will lead us in worship. Next Sunday is in fact World Communion Sunday, a Sunday each year on which we pay particular focus to the global scope of Christ’s mission and the unity of Christ’s church. As a celebration of World Communion Sunday, we will in fact for the first time in seven months be observing communion together in Sunday morning worship. We did so remotely on Maundy Thursday back in April, but besides that, it’s been seven months since we’ve had communion as part of Sunday worship, and I have to admit I’ve been, forgive the pun, hungry for it, and no doubt others have as well. Many thanks to Pastor Rachel who put the pieces together for us to come to Christ’s table safely. What we’ll do is use these prepackaged, single-serving communion packets with a wafer and cup of juice all in one. They’re apparently not all that filling, so if you’re hoping for a mid-worship snack, you might need to pick up more than one. (That’s a joke y’all.) But a great Sunday of worship to look forward to next week.

Then, after that, we’ll start a new series in the Gospel of John we’re calling “Signs and Wonders,” and it’ll look at the so-called seven signs, or seven miracles, of Jesus in John’s Gospels. If you’ve found yourself in just a tough, tough season thinking something like, “God, I need you to show me something, some sign that you’re still at work” maybe tune in, because these signs, as John tells us, were given so that we might believe and have life. That starts in two weeks.

Today, though, as we conclude this series that has been all about what we do, what we’re supposed to do, and the good news of how we fall short, we come to the “why.” If we’ve spent all this time deconstructing expectations and pressures we sense put upon us by family or friends or even, we sense, by God himself, and then try to reconstruct how we go about the life of faith in what we do, we come now to why we could and should do what it is we are called to do. Will you pray with me?

Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours.
Amen.

Many of you know the song “This Little Light of Mine.” Maybe you grew up singing it, maybe you grew up hearing other people singing it. Or maybe it doesn’t ring a bell, so a quick refresher: */This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine/* That’s how it goes. Maybe if you already knew that song, maybe you’re already familiar with the passage it came from, this passage, the one we just read, starting in v. 15: “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others.” That’s where the song comes from if you’ve never read this before, including the part that I always looked forward to as a kid, the part where as a kid you

were encouraged to shout at the top of your lungs, */Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm gonna let it shine./* And for longer than I probably should admit, I would sing that song not knowing really what a bushel was to begin with. I just knew that when it came to letting lights shine and all, bushels were bad news. Bushels? No! That was the extent of my knowledge of them: they were bad for letting lights shine.

But something that's been bugging me this week is this question. Are bushels all bad? Not just what they actually are—of course they're not all bad—I mean all bad when it comes to letting lights shine and all, as opposed to */Hide it under a bushel? No!//* Couldn't there be a good thing about bushels? Couldn't there be a good thing about bushels and shining lights?

The way Jesus talks about them here isn't positive but it's not the worst either. Jesus has just started what we know now as the great Sermon on the Mount, and in fact he just got done sharing what are known as the Beatitudes, a series of declarations of “Blessed are the [blank]” and “blessed are the ____.” He's just said that, and what he's doing is declaring who and what are valued or favored or blessed in the kingdom of heaven, in God's reality. It doubles in fact as a challenge to those who would follow him, because it means that if you follow Jesus, you should seek to further a world, a kingdom, in which the lowly, the poor in spirit, the meek, are all lifted up. And that's a really hard thing to do, because that's not how the world operates.

So then Jesus offers a few images to those listening, images that capture just how those who would follow Jesus should engage in a world that doesn't typically operate by the same rules.

He talks about how they are the salt of the earth. This could mean a few different things, but he could be speaking of salt's quality as a preservative, meaning they are what preserves the world. Or he could be speaking of how salt adds or brings out flavor, meaning they are what brings out the best in the world. Or maybe both. Whichever way he meant it, he's saying that for those who follow him, there is a charge to be engaged in the world, not to disengage from it. That's important. There's a charge for those who follow Jesus to be engaged in the world, not to disengage from it. To shirk this calling is as nonsensical as saying that salt would lose its saltiness. If salt loses its saltiness, it isn't salt anymore. If Christ's followers shy away from their calling in the world, then quite simply, they aren't following Christ.

Then Jesus goes to another image, saying “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” Same sort of logic here. He's saying that those who would follow him are charged to be a light, a city on a hill, a sign of hope, a sign showing what could be, and that light must shine. And in the same way that it would be nonsensical for salt to lose its saltiness, it's just as nonsensical to light a lamp only to hide it under a bushel. The light must shine—that's what lights are meant to do. And that's why, when we sing the song, we sing */Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm gonna let it shine./* Those pesky bushels.

But you know the good thing about bushels? They're good for hiding. Sometimes it's easier just to hide.

You know what a bushel is? It's a unit of measurement, usually for commodities or grains. It's used even today, though today it's just a weight measurement. In Jesus's time, it was about volume, a standardized container, and however much of one thing you could fit into that container was a bushel of whatever thing you were measuring, like oats or wheat or corn. So, a bushel or a bushel basket referred to these large baskets that were used to measure out commodities. Point is, they were big. And if one were so inclined to hide a lamp underneath one of these things, you could, because the good thing about bushels is, they're good for hiding.

And sometimes hiding is precisely what we'd prefer to do.

What are some reasons you would want to hide? I mean this whole series we've been talking about how we have been redeemed by the grace of God and how there is nothing we can do to earn our way more into the favor of God. Now there is this charge to be a light of that grace into the world. Life- and reality-changing stuff here. So why would we want to hide?

I asked that very question this past Wednesday. We just started a Wednesday evening Bible Study and discussion that'll focus on the Scripture passage for the coming Sunday, but also a bit of a look into what goes into putting a sermon together, and so I asked that very question to the group this past week.

One response was fear, or shame, wanting to hide ourselves. We don't want what we do to be out in the open. Because that's what Jesus is talking about: letting our light shine so that they may see our good works, he says in v. 16. What if we don't consider our works to be all that good?

Another response was modesty, not wanting to brag on ourselves, not wanting to draw attention to what we do. And those are valid points, and surely not the only ones that could be made. What are reasons you can think of to hide? Whatever those reasons are, the good thing about bushels is they're really good for hiding.

But that's not what we were made for.

Have you ever heard the saying, "Ships are safer when they're in port, but that's not what ships are made for"? Same kind of thing here. Christians are safer when we hide ourselves away, but that's not what we've been made for. Bushels might be good for hiding, but that's not where lights belong.

Where lights belong is out in the open. And I know that prospect might terrify us. It might terrify us because we feel like once we step out, we're only going to fall short once again. It might terrify us because we feel like once we step out all the attention is going to be on us. It might terrify us because we feel like once we step out everything is going to depend on us. And to that, I've got good news: no, it won't.

You see the good thing about being salt and being light is that we were never meant to be the main attraction. Sure we're meant to be shining, sure we're meant to be a city on a hill, but the Lord does not call us to shine, so to speak, to cast light on ourselves. What does he say? "Let your light shine before others, *so that* they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." So that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Put aside every expectation that you carry right now. Put aside every sense that you have to earn your way into someone else's graces or that you have to earn your way into God's favor. Put aside every sense that you have something you have live up to or else God won't love you. Put it all aside—it won't get you anywhere. All that's trying to tell you that what you do is for the sake of getting you something or drawing attention to you because of what you do. And that's just not true.

What is true is that the life most freed, the life most redeemed, the life most sanctified, is the life that most readily points not to ourselves but to the glory of God.

It's almost a cliché, isn't it? All to the glory of God, I'm sure we've heard that before. But that is the only way that the life of faith, the life following Jesus, won't just turn back into a rat race trying to gain approval. When the purpose behind everything we do is about shining a light on the glory of God, about pointing to the Lord so that others might give him glory, everything stops being about earning grace and becomes about demonstrating it.

So how will you show the grace and glory of God today?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**