JESUS, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

John 7:53–8:30

Key Verse: 8:12

“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’”

Some people love it when it gets dark outside; nightfall and the starry sky can fascinate and enchant. Others long to see a glowing sunrise and enjoy basking in a sunny day. In our world physical light and darkness are actually morally neutral phenomena. But in John’s Gospel light and darkness take on a spiritual dimension, a moral tone, and they’re a major theme often repeated. In today’s passage Jesus makes one of his seven famous “I am” statements. He says, “I am the light of the world.” He invites us to follow him so that we would not walk in darkness but have the light of life. In this study we want to learn what it means that Jesus is the light of the world. We want to think about what it means to follow him, to have the light of life, and why we need it. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

7:53–8:11 contains the famous story of a woman caught in the act of adultery. Scholars debate about this passage because it is not included in the earliest and best original manuscripts of the Bible. But it shows us what the gospel is so clearly, and gives a practical illustration of what it means that Jesus is the light of the world. So we want to study it carefully.

7:53 says, “Then they all went home.” After a long day’s events at the Feast, people were tired. They’d heard so many controversies swirling around Jesus, they didn’t want to think about it anymore. Now they each just wanted to go home and rest with their families. Look at 8:1. It begins with the word “but.” It means there’s a contrast here. Instead of going to rest, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives, just outside the city, where he usually went to pray. All the day’s events must’ve left him with a great burden in his heart. He was aware of the religious leaders’ plots against him. He was aware that the people were skeptical and easily persuaded, without much truth in their hearts. Carrying out the Father’s will in this situation was daunting. So Jesus went to spend time in prayer, to draw strength from God. He didn’t carry out his ministry with his human strength, but with much prayer. Look at 8:2. It’s striking that it all begins at dawn, when the light of the sun begins to shine. Jesus is already in the temple courts, ready to teach God’s word. And all the people had gathered around him. It shows how spiritually thirsty they were. The religious holiday they’d just observed couldn’t satisfy them. It also shows how much they needed a true shepherd. To Jesus, the best way to help people was to give them the word of God. God’s word is a lamp for our feet and a light on our path (Ps119:105). Jesus’ all night prayer and teaching God’s word early in the morning show how he lived in the light.

Look at 8:3. The scene of his beautiful Bible teaching to these thirsty people was rudely interrupted. In the early morning these religious leaders barged in with a woman caught in the act of adultery. What a contrast to Jesus! While he was praying all night and serving people first thing in the morning, these men were creeping around dark quarters to catch people doing something wrong, all so that they could just use them as bait. And they didn’t bring in the man—only the woman, suggesting what cowards they were. Though they were religious leaders, they were living in darkness.

It says they made this woman stand before the group. We can just imagine how horrible she must’ve felt—not properly dressed, totally shamed, humiliated, and scared. Of course she’d done something very wrong, but it still doesn’t seem right for her to be treated this way. They said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” These religious leaders knew the Bible, but their way of thinking was so superficial. They thought that because this woman was caught, she was a terrible sinner, whereas because they’d not been caught, they had the right to judge her. On the surface they sound like they care about right and wrong and about protecting people from the bad influence of adultery. But actually they don’t care about that at all. Their real motive is explained in verse 6. It was all a trap, to accuse Jesus. How so? They thought if Jesus said not to stone her, he’d be violating Moses’ Law. And if he said to stone her, he’d be contradicting his own practice of being merciful and friendly with sinners.

How did Jesus respond? Look at verse 6b. We have no idea what he was writing. But whatever it was, he was taking the time to calm things down. He wanted people not to be emotionally riled up, but to think. He was prayerfully seeking God’s guidance what to say and do. In a sense, he was doing his best to find a way to save the woman and to give people the right truth of God.

What happened? Look at verse 7. It was a brilliant answer. Jesus knew so well their legalistic, self-righteous mentality, and he spoke words that would completely frustrate them. If any one of them dared to throw the first stone, Jesus knew all the others would say, “So, you think you’re without sin? We know you!” It reminds us of the saying, “People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.” Or of Jesus’ own words, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Mt7:3) Here Jesus said simply, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground (7,8). It was quiet, yet powerful and convicting.

What happened next? Look at verse 9. Everyone left. No one threw a stone. Jesus’ words cast a bright light on this situation. No one had the right to judge and condemn the woman, because every person there was a sinner just like her. As sinners ourselves, we never have the right to judge others. Sadly, so many so-called followers of Jesus keep making this mistake and judging other sinners harshly. John’s Gospel repeatedly tells us that Jesus came not to condemn, but to save (3:17; 12:47). So his followers should be known as those who don’t judge but do their best to save sinners. Yet, just as in this situation, when it’s time to save a helpless, condemned person, often nobody shows up. The detail that the older people left first is telling. Older people may be more afraid of having their own record exposed. Younger people might have a harder time recognizing their own sinfulness. In any case, in the end it was only Jesus and the woman left. Jesus was the only one qualified to judge her, because he alone was without sin. And this woman definitely deserved to be judged.

Read verses 10,11. Jesus’ words to her were like light to her dark soul. He told her, “I don’t condemn you.” He meant, “I forgive you—even of this.” It’s the very essence of grace—totally undeserved, enough to cover the worst crimes, and, free. It’s almost too good to be true. Only Jesus’ words “Neither do I condemn you” can set us free, especially from self-condemnation of all kinds.

But Jesus also spoke the truth to her: “Go now and leave your life of sin.” It suggests that it wasn’t just this one act she’d gotten caught in; her whole life seemed to be a life of sin. It tells us that God’s grace doesn’t condone sin; it forgives but also empowers us to leave our life of sin. Many people find it so hard to leave their life of sin. They rationalize and make excuses for it. But Jesus doesn’t compromise. A life of sin is a spiritually dark life. We have to leave it if we’re truly going to follow Jesus. His words show us how his grace both forgives us and helps us make a new start.

Read verse 12. What does it mean that Jesus is the light of the world? Light symbolizes truth. Jesus shows us the truth about God, that he’s both the God of justice and the God of mercy, the God who wants to save. Jesus also shows us the truth about ourselves. Apart from God, we might think we’re good, or better than others, but really, we’re all living a life of sin, just in varying degrees. When we’re not close to God, even our religious knowledge and activities are superficial. We’re sick with various kinds of self-righteousness and a shallow understanding of ourselves and others. We need Jesus’ light to see who we really are. Light also symbolizes direction. Our direction should not be to condemn anyone. Our direction should be like that of our Lord Jesus, to save people. Our direction should be to help people experience God’s grace and find the strength to leave the life of sin.

Read verse 12 again. Jesus says our lives basically have only two options. We can either “walk in darkness” or follow him and “have the light of life.” What does it mean to walk in darkness? It starts with ignoring God and his word of truth. Walking in darkness means just following the ways of the world around us. Walking in darkness leads to living in fear and unbelief. It also leads to living in self-hatred, condemnation, meaninglessness and hopelessness.

On the other hand, having the light of life means having Jesus’ light within us. With his light, like him, we know that we came from God. With his light we can see the world around us for what it is, godless, dark and evil. With his light, we gain the courage and faith to live our lives the way God wants. With his light, we grow in the awareness of God’s amazing grace, and in treating others with his grace. With his light, we find the meaning of life, to glorify God. With his light, we find our real hope: like our Lord Jesus, we’re going back to God someday.

Jesus says everything hinges on whether we follow him or not. If we don’t follow him, we walk in darkness. If we do follow him, we have the light of life. As the light of the world he’s inviting anyone to follow him. But what does it mean to follow him? It means to accept Jesus as my light. It means to let his light shine on me, exposing my sin and helping me repent. It also means to accept him as my Lord and let him lead me instead of trying to control everything myself. Following him means listening carefully to his teaching and trying to live by it. Following him means centering my life on Jesus, not on myself. We live in a “me first” culture. We can bring this mentality even into our ideas about church. We attend only if it meets my needs, only if it fits me, only if I feel good there. While church does need to minister to our needs, the real emphasis should be on following and serving Jesus, not on me. Ultimately, following Jesus means imitating him. But we can’t really do that. We need God’s Spirit living in us to conform us more and more to the likeness of his Son (Ro8:11,29). The more we follow Jesus, the more our inner darkness subsides, and the more we have the light of life within us that fills us with true joy.

When Jesus said these beautiful words, the Pharisees immediately contradicted him (13). Jesus answered by contrasting himself with them (14,15). He knew where he came from and where he was going, but they had no idea. When they were not close to God, they judged everyone by human standards, but Jesus, who was truly close to God, judged no one. Jesus also described his relationship with God (16–18). He stands with the Father, and the Father testifies for him. They are very tight.

Look at verse 19a. It was their sarcastic, insinuating insult; they were implying they’d heard the rumor that his mother Mary had gotten pregnant without a husband. They were trying to say he was illegitimate. How did Jesus answer? Look at verse 19b. Their failure to recognize Jesus showed that they didn’t really know God. They hated Jesus all the more for saying this, but God didn’t allow them to seize him yet (20).

Jesus gave them a strong warning. Look at verse 21. He was basically saying their opportunity to repent was rapidly coming to a close. He said this out of a broken heart, because he wanted to save even them. How did they respond? Look at verse 22. They made fun of him, thinking he might kill himself. What did Jesus say to them? Read verses 23,24. Despite their terrible attitude, Jesus was still trying to help them repent and believe in him. Look at verse 25a. Again, it’s such a condescending, sarcastic question, treating him like he’s delusional. But Jesus keeps speaking truth to them. Jesus had been giving them the very words he heard from the Father. Though they didn’t listen and were mocking him, God would someday hold them accountable (25b,26). How did they respond? Look at verse 27. They still couldn’t understand that Jesus was telling them about God who sent him. Read verse 28. Jesus was predicting his death on a cross. Only when they saw him go to the cross would some of them have their spiritual eyes opened to see who he was and what he was doing. Jesus must’ve felt sorry that hardly anyone understood him. But he found great personal comfort in his Father God. Read verse 29. God’s own presence with him was a sign of God’s approval, and only this could sustain him in such a bad situation. Jesus could live in God’s presence, no matter what was going on around him, because he was so committed to pleasing him. According to verse 30, even though the environment was so unbelieving, his words had the power to help people believe.

Read verse 12. May God help us to experience the light of Jesus and make a new decision to really follow him. And may God use us to lead others to experience his wonderful light.