

“Lit For the Long Run”

Matthew 5:13-20

13 You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

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.

You are the light of the world, and it's no accident. The world needs your presence, grace, truth and endurance.

It was one of the most memorable sights in the history of the Olympics: Muhammad Ali in 1996, already struggling with Parkinson's disease, lighting the Olympic torch in Atlanta. The world held its breath as he stood there, trembling but determined, holding the torch high. It was a moment of vulnerability and strength, of courage and inspiration. Ali's flame lit more than a cauldron; it lit the hearts of millions. Ali — who in 1960 was known as Cassius Clay and won a gold medal at the Rome Olympics in the light heavyweight boxing division at age 18 — now had a body that was broken but still possessed a spirit that burned as bright as the flame that lit the torch. The image of Ali that night endured, not just because of who he was, but because of what he symbolized: perseverance, dignity and purpose under pressure.

Opening ceremonies for the 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Milan, Italy, will be next Friday, February 6. The torch will be lit, and the games will be in full swing by the following Sunday. Millions of people across the world will be watching athletes compete on the global stage. From bobsled tracks to ice rinks, from opening ceremonies to gold medal finishes, we will be captivated not only by athletic excellence, but by the spirit behind it. Every athlete represents more than themselves. They represent their flag, culture and values. Every anthem played and every victory claimed is a message: *This is who we are*. And nothing captures that symbolism better than the Olympic flame.

Since its modern inception, the lighting of the Olympic cauldron has been one of the most anticipated and symbolic moments of the games. All eyes are on the torch bearer chosen to ignite the flame at the opening ceremony. It is a moment loaded with history, pride and meaning.

That singular flame, passed from hand to hand across miles and continents, reminds us that *some lights are meant to be shared*. And once lit, they are meant to

burn for more than a moment. Before the Olympic flame reaches San Siro Stadium in Milan, it will have been on a journey that began November 26, 2025, in Olympia, Greece. There, per tradition, the lighting ceremony took place at the Temple of Hera using a parabolic mirror to concentrate the rays of the sun; the flame then traveled to Athens for the handover ceremony. When the torch arrived in Rome on December 5, it stayed there for only two days before being carried to 20 regions of Italy, all 110 provinces, and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. More than 10,000 torch bearers participated in the relay, ensuring broad representation of cultures and regional histories. The light that was lit in Olympia was lit for the long run — hundreds of miles, and many countries. [NOTE 1]

Jesus, too, speaks of representation. In Matthew 5, part of what we call the Sermon on the Mount, he looks at a group of ordinary disciples and says something extraordinary: “You are the light of the world.” Not, “Try to be light.” Not, “If you work hard enough, you might become light.” Jesus says you *are* light. Already. By virtue of following him.

And with that declaration comes responsibility. Jesus says, “A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house” (vv. 14-15). In other words, *your light has a purpose* — to shine. To be visible. To make a difference!

But here’s the challenge: light doesn’t always feel bright. Faith can flicker. Conviction can wane. We get tired, disillusioned and distracted. We forget that the world is watching, and we stop shining. And that’s where Jesus’ words are both encouragement and a warning. Don’t fade. Don’t hide. Don’t forget who you are. *Stay lit — for the long run.* [NOTE 2]

Jesus begins with a stunning affirmation: “You are the light of the world” (v. 14). He’s not speaking to scholars or celebrities. He’s speaking to fishermen, tax collectors, mothers, workers — everyday people. And he tells them they are light.

Light isn’t just what we *do*; it is who we *are* when we belong to Christ. Just as the sun doesn’t try to shine — it just does — we, too, radiate God’s truth and love when we stay connected to the source. It’s interesting that in John 8:12, Jesus refers to himself as the “light of the world.” He calls his disciples the “light of the world.” This is not reflected light. This isn’t light bouncing from a transfigured Jesus who’s glowing like a phosphorescent lamp in the dark. As the brothers and sisters of Jesus and as children of God, it is in our DNA to be light and shed light wherever we are. Rather amazing, when you think about it.

The Olympics remind us that athletes train for years to represent something beyond themselves. Jesus is saying you, too, are representing something bigger: God’s kingdom. Your character, kindness and convictions are NOT private things. They shine. [NOTE 3]

In Jesus' day, cities like Jerusalem, Hebron and Samaria stood proudly on the hills, visible for miles around. (Story of hunting in New York near Lake Placid) Travelers could look up and see the lights of these cities and know they were nearing safety, community and the promise of rest. A city on a hill was not trying to be seen. It just was. Its elevation made it unavoidably visible.

Jesus uses this metaphor for a reason. He isn't just orating for the sake of establishing his reputation for being incredibly smart and preternaturally wise — which people had been saying since he was 12 (see Luke 2:47). No, Jesus intended to remind his kinfolk and inhabitants of Galilee that their lives, like ours, were meant to shed light, add light and spread light. In other words, our *raison d'être* is not to hoard the light or hide it under a wicker basket, but to share the light. If you're at home with your family and it is growing dark, you light the lamp and hang it on a stand to illuminate the room. You do not stow it under a grain basket on the floor, where the light would be useless.

It is hard for us to understand what Jesus means by “the light of the world” because our experience with light is so different from his — and from most people over the course of human history.

Thomas Edison created the first version of his electric lightbulb in 1879. By 1925, only half of American homes had electricity. It wasn't until Franklin Roosevelt's Rural Electrification Act of 1936, a New Deal program, that electricity began to be extended beyond larger towns and cities. It took until 1949 for 90% of American homes to be electrified. Before copper wires came into the house, gas or kerosene lamps were the only way to improve on candles or an open fire on the hearth.

Today's widespread electric lighting, not only in our homes but also in our streets, is something we take for granted. Nighttime satellite photos show vast swatches of our continent blazing with light. Not even the impertinent neon of Times Square or the Las Vegas Strip seems especially remarkable to us.

Not so in Jesus' time. Other than open fires, clay lamps with burning wicks dipped in olive oil were the only way to challenge the darkness. Candles had not been invented. To step out into the night holding an olive oil lamp was to offer a feeble challenge indeed.

So, “You are the light of the world” must have seemed like an utterly fantastic metaphor to those who first heard those words. Light up *the world*? How could we ever do that, Lord? What do you think we are — *the sun*?

It's only a metaphor, of course. But even if you unpack it — understanding that Jesus is talking not about light, but about spreading the good news — it seems equally fantastic. In the past century or so, we've brought electric light to nearly every place of human habitation in our land. But we still have a long way to go before we light the lamp of Christ's love in every human heart!

Further, this light is not primarily for show. Its purpose is to influence, guide and lead. Jesus honestly believes that the people on this hillside above the Sea of Galilee, not far from Tiberius, could be the first of what we call influencers today. We are called, he says, *to influence*, and *to be influencers*. The way we treat others, speak, spend, forgive and care — these things become like lights on the hillside, guiding others toward hope, love and ultimately toward God. We may not even realize who is watching or how far our light reaches, but our faith lived out becomes a beacon, just as those ancient cities were to weary travelers.

But let's be honest. Sometimes, we wish we *could* hide. It's easier not to be noticed. But Jesus' metaphor won't let us off the hook. Our light isn't meant for secrecy. We aren't called to glow in isolation. We are called to *influence* by keeping our light visible.

There are many examples to which you could allude, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Fred Rogers, Oscar Romero (Archbishop of El Salvador who spoke out against oppression and violence and who was martyred for his public witness), Harriet Tubman, Corrie ten Boom, Clara Barton (founder of the American Red Cross), Martin Luther King Jr., Jean Vanier (founder of L'Arche, a community for people with disabilities), Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa. [You might ask for suggestions from the congregation before continuing.]

Let's focus on Harriet Tubman, an arbitrary choice, to drill down on this *influencer* concept. She was known as the "Moses" of her people. Born into slavery, Tubman escaped to freedom in the North — but she didn't stop there. She returned again and again, at great personal risk, to guide others to freedom along the Underground Railroad. She carried no weapons but her unshakable faith and, often, *a lantern* — a literal light in the darkness, leading weary souls to safety.

In *The Water Dancer* (2019), author Ta-Nehisi Coates reimagines Tubman as a figure of extraordinary power — called Moses, as she was in life — who could transport people across space and memory in their journey toward liberation. Though Coates uses magical realism, the essence is faithful to her legacy. Tubman is depicted as a woman of vision, memory and purpose. Her "magic" is not fantasy; it is the fierce clarity of someone who knows the cost of freedom and is willing to pay it. She's like a kind of spiritual force — a light that breaks through darkness, not only guiding others but illuminating what slavery tried to erase.

In real life, Tubman said, "I always told God, 'I trust to you. I do not know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me.'" This is not the voice of someone hiding her light under a basket; this is hanging a light from the top of a steeple. Tubman never sought fame. She wasn't concerned with being seen; she was concerned about the light being seen. She wanted to "lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known ... [to] turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground" (Isaiah 42:16). And this is the

heart of Jesus' teaching: *You don't need to be famous to shine. You just need to be faithful.*

Light also has a *utilitarian* purpose. Jesus explains that we are the light of the world, so that “they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” We shine not to impress, but to direct. Not to spotlight ourselves, but to highlight God. [NOTE 4]

The goal of a lighthouse isn't to say, “Look at me!” but to say, “Look at the safe way home.” Jesus calls us to live in such a way that our lives point beyond us — to the source of all light. That's our purpose. The light reveals. It shows what is real. It makes the hidden visible. Our lives should reveal God's heart, which is a heart of compassion, truth and mercy.

We are sometimes told to be like a tiny Jesus modeling the big, historical Jesus. Perhaps, it would be better to imagine ourselves — as Jesus himself suggested — as little lanterns showing others the character of a loving God.

When shopping for lightbulbs, we generally buy those that promise to last the longest for the least amount of money. But how does this metaphor translate into keeping our own candles lit when everything going on in the world and our personal lives seems to blow them out? How do we keep shining, especially when the world feels so dark? How do we find meaning in the work we do? [NOTE 5]

Last summer, top-ranked golfer Scottie Scheffler raised some questions in an interview about what drives him, what gives his life meaning, and what doesn't. He enjoys golf, but golf is not what brings meaning to his life.

In another interview, Arthur Brooks, a professor at Harvard Business School and author of *The Happiness Files: Insights on Work and Life*, was interviewed by a staffer at *The New York Times*. The interview focused exclusively on Scheffler's remarks. Brooks brought up Olympic medalists: “Research ... shows that the happiest Olympic medalists are the bronze medalists. The bronze medalists compared themselves, the rest of their lives, to the losers who didn't medal. The silver medalists compared themselves for the rest of their lives with the gold medalists, and they're the unhappiest by far of the three. They die earliest and they're unhappiest.”

As for the gold medalists, “A majority of Olympic gold medalists suffer from clinical depression at some point in the first three months after winning their gold medal. Because it doesn't satisfy.” They call this “the arrival fallacy.”

The arrival fallacy is that mistaken belief that incremental progress is great, and so arrival at the goal is the best, and it just isn't. Arrival at the goal is nothing more than an intention, much like a pin on the map, so that you know which direction to go. So, you can make the progress that you actually crave. *You have to know where you are going to make progress getting there!*

People who are extraordinarily successful, unbelievably hardworking and lucky — that’s the combination for people who get the right genetics and the right parents and the right brain and all that. But they’re also extremely hardworking. These are the people who have outsized success. They get these big jumps and adulation from strangers and all these worldly rewards. And they fall prey more than anybody in the world to the arrival fallacy. —Rustin Dodd, “Scottie Scheffler raised questions about happiness and fulfillment. This professor has answers.” *The New York Times*, July 18, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/>. Retrieved July 20, 2025.

The Green Bay Packer team that played in Super Bowl 31 had a locker room theme that year, “Joy in the Journey”. They made sure that they appreciated all the hard work and the fruits of that labor all through the season so that when they played the Super Bowl they wouldn’t be all focused on the end, too worried about winning and losing, just focused on doing their best on each play! They won.

Let me tell you a secret: light doesn’t try harder. As the “light of the world,” we don’t compare ourselves to winners or losers. We keep our own candles lit by staying connected to the Power Source.

As you watch the Olympics over the weeks, you will get to know some athletes up close and personal. You’ll discover that they train relentlessly. They don’t just show up and perform. They endure setbacks, injuries, fatigue — and keep going. The successful ones don’t compare themselves to others. To stay lit for the long run means to remain rooted in Christ, consistent in faith and faithful in witness — even when it’s hard. **[NOTE 6]**

You might feel like a flickering candle some days ... like a silver medalist standing between the winner and a loser. But a flickering candle still gives light. And in darkness, even a flicker can change everything. You are the light of the world. Not by accident. Not by effort. But by calling. The world needs your light. Not your perfection, but your presence. Your grace, truth and endurance. So, shine.

Shine in the hospital room. Shine in the classroom. Shine in the break room. Shine in the family gathering. Shine in the voting booth. Shine in your grief. Shine in your hope.

The flame has been lit in you. The world is watching. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Let your light burn like the Olympic flame — bold, visible, unwavering and lit — for the long run. —*Timothy Merrill and Carl Wilton contributed to this material.*

Sermon Notes for “Lit for the Long Run”
based on Matthew 5:13-20 given at Doster Community Church
February 1, 2026

- I. “You ARE the light of the world”. Jesus doesn’t say “try to be light, not if you work hard at it, He says you ARE light, already! Your light has a purpose ...to shine, to be visible, to make a difference!
- II. Light isn’t just what we do it is who are in Christ! We should radiate God’s truth and love. That doesn’t happen if we don’t stay connected to the source. Jesus is the Light of the World. This is not reflected light. We are to BE light.
- III. Major cities were built on hills/mountain so travelers could see the light and know they were nearing safety and rest. We are called to be influencers by the way we treat others, speak, spend, forgive and care. You don’t need to be famous to shine, just faithful!
- IV. Light has a purpose! Jesus says, “you are the light of the world ...that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” The goal of a lighthouse is not to say, “Look at me!” but rather “caution, find the safe way home.”
- V. How do we keep shining when the world feels so dark? Light doesn’t try harder. Don’t compare. Stay connected to the power source! You can’t expect to keep your light lit when disconnected from the power source!
- VI. What are you going to do about it? Write something down! What are you going to do to stay lit in the next week? Next month? Let your light shine!