

Matthew 5:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Analysis

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. This verse concludes Jesus' metaphor of believers as "the light of the world" (5:14-15), providing the practical application. The imperative lampsato (λαμψάτω, "let shine") calls for deliberate, visible testimony through righteous living. The light is not something believers create but reflects Christ, the true Light (John 8:12), shining through transformed lives.

"Before men" (emprosthen ton anthropon, ἔμπροσθεν τὸν ἄνθρωπον) indicates public witness—not ostentatious display but authentic Christian character displayed in daily life. The purpose is not self-glorification but that observers "may see your good works" (kala erga, καλὰ ἔργα)—beautiful, excellent deeds that reflect God's character. These works flow from regenerate hearts, not mere moralism or self-righteousness condemned elsewhere (Matthew 6:1-18).

The ultimate purpose is doxological: "glorify your Father which is in heaven" (doxasosin ton patera, δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα). True good works point beyond the believer to God Himself. This paradox—being seen yet directing glory to God—characterizes Christian witness. Our light shines not to showcase our righteousness but to display God's transforming grace. This guards against both hiding our faith (false humility) and performing for human praise (false piety). The Christian life becomes a living sermon, testifying to divine grace that produces radical transformation.

Historical Context

In ancient Mediterranean culture, honor and shame were central social values. Public behavior directly reflected on one's family and community. Jesus' call to visible righteousness would have resonated with this honor culture, but He redirected it—the honor goes to the heavenly Father, not the individual or their earthly family. This challenged both Jewish religious leaders who performed righteousness for human recognition (Matthew 6:1-2, 5, 16) and Gentile culture focused on personal and family honor.

The imagery of light held deep significance in Jewish thought. Isaiah prophesied that God's servant would be "a light to the Gentiles" (Isaiah 49:6), that God's people would arise and shine because His glory had risen upon them (Isaiah 60:1). Lamps in first-century homes were essential for nighttime activity—typically small oil lamps providing limited but crucial illumination in windowless rooms. Everyone understood the foolishness of lighting a lamp then covering it.

For the early church facing persecution, this teaching carried special weight. Christians were often accused of antisocial behavior, atheism (rejecting Roman gods), and various crimes. Peter later echoed this teaching (1 Peter 2:12), urging believers to maintain good conduct among Gentiles so that their good works would lead to glorifying God. Christian witness through transformed living became crucial apologetic evidence.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. Do your daily actions and speech patterns make observers curious about your faith and point them toward God?
2. In what ways might you be hiding your Christian identity out of fear, shame, or desire to fit in?
3. How can you balance letting your light shine while avoiding the pride and performance Jesus warns against in Matthew 6?
4. What specific 'good works' in your life currently bring glory to God rather than drawing attention to yourself?
5. How does your understanding of Christ as the true Light inform your role as a light-bearer in the world?

Interlinear Text

οὕτως λαμψάτω τοῖς φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τοῖς
so **shine** **which** **light** **Let your** **before** **which**
G3779 G2989 G3588 G5457 G5216 G1715 G3588

ἀνθρώπων ὅπως ἴδωσιν ὑμῶν τοῖς καλὰ ἔργα καὶ
men **that** **they may see** **Let your** **which** **good** **works** **and**
G444 G3704 G1492 G5216 G3588 G2570 G2041 G2532

δοξάσωσιν τοῖς πατέρα ὑμῶν τοῖς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς
glorify **which** **Father** **Let your** **which** **is in** **which** **heaven**
G1392 G3588 G3962 G5216 G3588 G1722 G3588 G3772

Additional Cross-References

1 Peter 2:12 (Good): Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

John 15:8 (Parallel theme): Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.

Titus 2:7 (Good): In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity,

Ephesians 5:8 (Light): For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light:

1 Peter 3:16 (Good): Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.

1 Peter 4:14 (Parallel theme): If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.

1 Peter 2:9 (Light): But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light:

Isaiah 58:8 (Light): Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward.

Titus 3:14 (Good): And let our's also learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, that they be not unfruitful.

1 Timothy 6:18 (Good): That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate;