Exploring and Proclaiming the Depths of Scripture
FOCAL POINT MINISTRIES

Christmas Lights

Shining Brightly for Christ this December

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The kids and I were driving into our neighborhood, with the kids in the back seat. As we entered the street that we live on, we all at once noticed the overachievers in our neighborhood. They were all putting up their Christmas lights, and they go wild on my street. How about yours? I mean, it's good going. My three-year-old, John, spoke up and said, "Hey, Dad, why do we put lights on our house anyway? What's that all about?"

And I thought to myself, "Well, it's peer pressure—pressure from you guys, you know, just wanting to give generously to the electric company." Lots of things popped into my head, but I thought, Here's a teaching moment, an instructive moment. And I said, "John, I'm sure people put up lights for all kinds of reasons. Some think they look nice, some probably do feel pressured into it, or whatever. But if we put our lights up this year, we've got to make sure that we make a mental connection, because there is one in the Bible."

And I thought it was apropos that John asked the question, because I immediately thought of the Apostle John, who uses the analogy of light. He makes the theological connection between biblical truth and light and Christ coming in light all the time. And so we began to talk about what the Apostle John had to say about it all. But I had a chance to warn him of a danger, and the danger is that you can't do things around Christmastime particularly and not know why we're doing them. And I praised him and thanked him for asking. We should ask those questions: Why are we doing this?

Because the danger really, as Isaiah told his people in Isaiah 29, is that we'll draw near to God with our words or our traditions, but our hearts and our minds might be far from him. And Jesus repeated that in Matthew 15. He said that's a grave problem to have. As a matter of fact, that's something that really annoys Christ. And you can imagine, at a celebration that's supposed to be about his arrival—his birthday, if you will—to have us doing a lot of things and just kind of losing sight of what they're all about. That's the problem.

Now, generally, we don't have sermons about Christmas lights. But I thought today it might be appropriate, because God had so much to say about the coming of Christ and the connection to something called, and analogized as, light. So if you have your Bibles, so that we don't miss the connection as to why we put up lights in honor of Christ's birth, I want you to turn to John chapter 1 and just from the beginning see how the Apostle John wants us to recognize that if you're going to talk about the coming of Christ, there's no better analogy than the analogy of light, because that's what it was: piercing into a dark place.

John chapter 1, verse number 1—familiar words in the prologue of John's Gospel and biography regarding Christ. He says, "In the beginning was the Word." Now, that's a weird phrase to use regarding the person of Christ, but it is apt. And if you were with us and you've been with us in our study of Hebrews, you know that's exactly how the book of Hebrews starts: that Christ is this expression of the Father, this exact radiance of who God is—in essence, the picture that we can see of

the Father. And though God may seem distant and out there, here, if you want to hear him, if you want to see him, here's his expression: the Word.

And though it comes in certainly the confluence of Greek thought and all that, the bottom line is that here is God presenting himself. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And for those of you Greek students out there, or readers of the New World Translation, let's just make sure we understand that that's exactly what this Greek text says. And for those of you technical folks among us and you grammarians, there are at least five anarthrous uses of the noun *theos* in the first chapter of the book of John. It's probably not a line that will be quoted often from this sermon, but the point is you'll often find the word God used without a definite article.

And we always, in the Gospel of John, as we look at these references—and there are five just in the first 18 verses alone—see the word used without a definite article in the Greek language. And we know John, in every case, following all the grammatical rules of the definite article, is always referring to God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and not some imaginative level of some deity, some pantheon of little gods. That's not what we're talking about. There's nothing in this text that would refer to that, and all the nonsense about, "Well, you know, the Greek really says..." What the Greek says is, "The Word was God," the Creator of heaven and earth.

And that, by the way, is the interesting part of what's happening here. God is expressing himself. The Father is now being seen in the Son. Look at the next phrase: "He was with God in the beginning." And if you wonder about his credentials, just like in Hebrews chapter 1, verses 1 through 4, this is where we go. You want to know from a Jewish mindset, or from any Old Testament background, who the God of the universe is? Well, he's the Creator of everything. And that's exactly what he says in verse 3: "Through him all things were made; without him," that is, the Word, Christ, "nothing was made that has been made." If it's been made, it was made by the Word, by Christ. That's a pretty big position.

In him, in Christ, was life, which, by the way, is the big comparison and contrast in the Bible. We've got a problem. The wages of sin is death. We've got to fix that problem if we're ever going to have any hope of enjoying anything in eternity. So we've got to solve the problem of death. And so Christ comes in with the solution. And if you want to kind of get this in our minds clearly, we've got to understand that what John is trying to say in this next phrase here is that he was the light of men. He is trying to penetrate the problem with the solution. And this isn't just some prophet or good teacher. This is God himself.

And before we break this down a little bit, let's at least put the title down. If you haven't found your worksheet yet, it should be in your worship packet. Unfold that, if you would, and jot this down. Because we're entering into—and I know we just kind of put a bookmark here in our discussion of John 1—but the whole point of this message is to prepare us for the December activities that you and I will all have to engage in, where we're going to hear a lot of talk about Christmas and a lot of lights and decorations and parties and presents and food and all this other stuff, and we've got to get back to the realization that all the trappings and glitter of Christmas is really about—and I know this is no huge, "Wow, this is so profound, Mike. I'm so glad you told us"—it's all about Christ. That's what it's all about.

And so let's put it down this way. Amid all the glitter of Christmas—number one in your outline—let's make sure that we, just like John, are pointing to the "light." Put that in quotation marks. Of course, we're referring here to the light of the world, Christ himself, the person who solves the problem. And then let's just break this down a little bit. The first thing we've already seen in the first few verses is we're not talking about a man here. We're not just talking about a mere man or a prophet or a good teacher. When we, this Christmas season, do our trees or our houses or our parties or our presents, what we're celebrating is the entrance of God himself into space-time reality. Here he comes: the incarnation.

God puts on flesh, Philippians 2. He is in the form of God, but he takes on the appearance of a man. We're not talking here about celebrating the birthday of a great person. This is not Lincoln's Birthday. It's not Presidents' Day. This is the birth of God himself, the Creator of heaven and earth. And if you want to talk about what we're celebrating this December, we're celebrating the arrival of the Creator to space-time. That's what we're celebrating. We're not celebrating just our religious values or some good moral teacher or some "Confucius say." We're not talking about that. We're talking about God himself. The person who formed us and made us was laid in a manger. That's what we're talking about. God takes on human form.

What for? To bring us life. To bring us life. What are you talking about? Why does God have to be born as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem? Because he needs to live through the phases of life—childhood, infancy, young adulthood, teenage life, adulthood. He's got to do all of that to fulfill all righteousness. The problem I have is that I deserve to be cast away from the presence of God into outer darkness because I'm not perfect. I am not holy. I deserve to be cast out of a holy place. If I got to walk through the gates of heaven as-is, I'd mess it up. It's kind of like: if you find the perfect church, don't join it because you'll screw it up, right? You've heard that before. Same thing with heaven. You find a perfect place like the New Jerusalem—don't go there, because once you walk through the gates, it's all messed up, because you're not perfect.

But we need to be perfect, because I want to spend eternity in a place of God's blessing. How do I do that? I need life. See, because I reek of death, because the wages of sin is death. How do I take death out of the picture? I need this thing called life, this person called Christ, the Word of God, the expression of the Father. And just to put it in one big banner analogy that he's going to develop here, it's light in a dark place. We have, this Christmas season, the opportunity to celebrate the birth of the Creator of the universe who is bringing, let's put it this way, the solution to the problem. That's what we're celebrating.

What problem? My loneliness? My marital problems? My disputes with friends and relational issues? No. We're talking about the fact that when you die, you should be cast into outer darkness, away from the presence of God and the glory of his power and all the gifts that go with that. But you have an opportunity not to, if you can get the death problem taken away. Jesus Christ, God in human form, has come to solve your problem. That's light. That's a big deal.

Look at how he develops this. "That light," verse 5, "shines in the darkness." But the darkness—and here's the problem that we have at Christmastime as we point to Christ—they haven't understood it. Have you noticed how our culture is just itching to get Christ extracted from this holiday? You notice

that? Even now, I read this week of a school district that won't allow Santa anymore. Now, I've never been up on Santa, but they don't want Santa because Santa might make you think of Christ. And that's too much Christmas for us. So I don't know what it is now. It's hot cocoa and candles or something. But the point is, the world goes, "We don't want this." They don't understand it. They don't care for it. But the light that comes here is coming to solve the problem.

The problem is it's not understood by people that are exposed to the truth of Christ. Verse 6: "There was a man who was sent from God. His name was John." That's my son's favorite verse. We're talking about John the Baptizer here, not the author of the Gospel. "He came as a witness to testify concerning that light." He's doing this—the big finger, he's pointing: "Here he is. Here he is. Here's the light. Here's the answer to our problem"—so that through him, through Christ, all men might believe. He himself, John, was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light. That's what he was all about.

I love the analogy. All he was doing was pointing people to the light. "Look over here. Point over here." That was John's job—John the Baptist. The true light, look at this, verse 9, that gives light to every man was coming into the world. If you would just turn your attention to him, he will change everything. I love that. And all the goal of the people who know what Christ is all about—their job is to take people's faces and turn them toward the light. Just look over here. Look over here. What an opportunity we have at Christmas. Now, I know everybody's fighting us on this, but to take people's minds and turn them toward Christ.

All this is about—we put up lights for Christ. We celebrate Christmas. We exchange presents for... This is about Jesus Christ, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has invaded space-time to solve my problem because I deserve God's wrath. But instead, I can get God's blessing. How do I get that? Trusting in—we already had the word—believing in, clinging to Christ. Man, that's big. That's great. That was John's job. And he says, if you just look over there, he can give light to every man.

Verse 10: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him"—here's the Creator—"the world didn't recognize him. He came to that which was his own," we're talking now about Israel, right? He was born of the tribe of Judah. He went to Judah and all the other 11 tribes, and they didn't receive him. They didn't embrace him as the King, as the Messiah. Yet to all who embrace him as what? As King and Messiah. That's what Israel didn't do. To those who trust in his name, believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Now let's just understand this for a second. I'm pointing to the Creator of heaven and earth who was born into space-time to solve my biggest problem. And if I would embrace him, unlike most of Israel that didn't embrace him, I will now become a child of God. I will be adopted into the family of God. Assumption predicated upon the fact that I'm not if I don't. Following that? I'm not a child of God if I don't. Now, I know at Christmastime, often we see the blending of these spiritual thoughts and people's Christmas trees and Coke and "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing" and whatever—is that still playing?—and we start to hear phrases like, and you hear it even in the Christmas carols that are playing out there, that we're all children of God, right? We're just all children. And the answer that the Scripture gives is, not unless you embrace the light of Christ. No, you're not. But you can be.

Now we're breaking this down. I'm pointing to the Creator of heaven and earth who has come to solve my ultimate problem. And if you would embrace him, unlike Israel did as King and Messiah, guess what? You can be a child of God, forever changing your status with your Creator. You were alienated. You were far off. You don't deserve his blessings, but you will become not just a friend of God—you'll become like his kid. You'll become a child of God. To them he gave the right to become children of God, children not born of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will—"Let's have a baby"—we're not talking about that, but born of God.

"The Word became," verse 14, "became flesh and he made his dwelling among us." The Creator has visited us. We've seen his glory, John says—the apostle—the glory of the one and only. He was shining brightly, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. Two great concepts. He came with this offer and plan of forgiveness and truth. You've got to embrace it. Don't turn from it. Don't keep hugging the darkness. Come to this light and embrace Christ.

Look at verse 15. John the Baptist testifies concerning him, and he cries out, saying, "This is he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" Underline verse 16: "From the fullness of his grace we've all received one blessing after another." I love that verse. Here is John saying, we've embraced the light, and now we're out here pointing other people to the light, and you know what? We can stand back and testify to this: Man, we've received one blessing after another.

You want to talk about Christmas? You want to talk about exchanging gifts? You know, give an MP3 player or give Dad a new tie. All of that is about this: We have in Christ not only become children of God, but God has lavished on us, as John said in 1 John 3, his love, and we have now one blessing after another. Is life perfect yet? No, we're not in the New Jerusalem. But you know what we have? One blessing after the next. We give gifts. We celebrate the goodness of God. It's a lot like Thanksgiving, because we are recognizing that God is the source of all good things for us.

He solved our problem. We're children of God, and we are celebrating one blessing after another. So bring out the big old gigantic bird, right? Bring out the mashed potatoes, use real butter, skip the margarine, give a good present, celebrate. Why? Because—you know—"Hey, we're all children of God, teach the world to sing, harmony"? No. Why? Because we as believers and followers of Christ, the light of the world, have forgiveness. We're children of God, and we celebrate one blessing after another. We have a lot to celebrate this December.

The world, though, is going, "I don't know. It's kind of nice. Oh, talk about religion. That's not good." Our job is not just to celebrate Christmas and celebrate it to the full—the coming of the light. We are to point people to it. You see those guys that are hired—I think it's effective—they hire them, they give them these big red arrows, and they say, you know, "Joe's Apartments this way," and they've got their headphones on and they're out on the corner spinning the arrow. You've seen that? Did you like that? You like that a little too much. The things people remember about my sermons, it's amazing.

But yeah, picture that. Not me, but picture the guy who's doing it—the ball cap backward, he's got the arrow, he's trying to get you to go to Joe's Apartments, check out Joe's Apartments, and you know he's listening to music and he's just pointing to the apartments, right? That is exactly our job at

Christmastime. Not only to celebrate the joy and the reality and the truth of the light shining in darkness, and we've embraced it, but to get other people to recognize, "That's where it goes. It goes right over here. Go and check out the whole point of this celebration." That's what Christmas is about.

And I know it may sound trite, and I sound corny even saying it, but those little buttons and little pins and bumper stickers—they're true. He is the reason for the season. And it feels corny saying that. But, you know, some of you have those pins on today, right? "He's the reason for the season," okay? But you know what? It's got to be a lot more than a bumper sticker or a lapel pin for us. It has to be when we're willing to say, "Guys, I just want to let you know this is what it's all about."

And when you go to your office party, or when you have your extended family and they don't all get this thing called Christianity, and you have a chance there to talk about what Christmas is to you, open your mouth and point them to the light and say, "This is all about the coming of God, Creator of heaven and earth, to solve a problem I couldn't solve. And you know what? Since I've embraced Christ, he has lavished on me one blessing after another, and I am now a child of God, and it's an amazing thing, and that's why we celebrate Christmas in our house." That needs to be a part of your vocabulary.

Either as you talk about it, or you send out Christmas cards, or you write a little greeting to people, or you bring cookies to your neighbor, or you have the tree and you talk to your kids about what this is all about—whatever it is, point them to Christ. They ask you to pray because you're the Jesus freak at the family dinner? Pray about pointing people to Christ, right? That's not just me, right? You think it's bad for you: "Oh, would the reverend like to pray for us tonight?" But it's happening to some of you too, and that's good, because now we have a chance to say, "Hey, this is what we're celebrating." We're pointing people to the light of Christ. That's the job of you and I. We're ambassadors of Christ.

Now, that's the sermon you expected, right? Come to church, Christmastime, reason for the season. Oh yeah, got that. Well, there's more to it, okay? More coming—maybe you didn't expect, okay? Turn, if you would, with me to John chapter 3, as you keep pointing to the light. And even maybe this morning, as you get motivated—yeah, you're right, I need to be pointing to the light, I need to be saying, "Hey, it's about Christ"—as you start thinking that through, here's what you're thinking. Two things. You're thinking, This feels good, to think about doing what God wants me to do. If I'm an ambassador and I'm celebrating Christ and the rest of the world isn't going to point to Christ, if we don't point to Christ, who will? So yeah, you're right. I feel good. I want to point people to Christ this Christmas.

Okay, that feels good. And you're saying, "Wow, listen to that list. He solves our problem. We become children of God. One blessing after the next. This is a good message." Got two good things going so far. I feel good about doing the right thing, and I feel good that what I'm telling them is a good message. It's called the gospel, and gospel means good news. So far I'm feeling good, right? Here's the problem. John chapter 3, Jesus talking to Nicodemus, and here's what he says about the problem that light brings to people.

Verse 16. Let's start with the good message. "God so loved the world, gave his one and only Son"—this is John 3:16—"that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." That's great. And we can even add this: God didn't send his Son into the world to condemn the world. Christ came, and the whole point of Christmas is to say that we can be saved through him. That's why he came. But

here's the problem. If we believe in him, we trust in him, we're not condemned. But if we don't trust in him, we're condemned. That's the problem. You've got to embrace the light because you don't have hope without it. If you don't believe in the name of God's one and only Son, if you don't trust in him, you're the problem.

And Jesus says, "You know, Nicodemus, there will be a problem with all of this, and here's the problem." Verse 19: "This is the verdict." Here's the end of the map. Here's the bottom line. If you feel good representing Christ, as you should, and you feel good that the message is good news—God loves us, he wants to bring us forgiveness and not condemnation—here's the problem: "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light." Why? Because their deeds were evil. And here's the thing about sin—it's kind of fun, and people kind of like it, and they don't want to stop it. See, that's the problem with sin.

No amens to that because you're in church, but you know it's true. Sin is kind of fun. It's what I like to do, and I want to do it, and I don't want to stop doing it, and I don't want you telling me I have to stop doing it. And that's why I don't like all you Jesus freaks. You always tell me... I like what I'm doing. So if you want to introduce your Christ at Christmas, I'm not interested. Matter of fact, look at the next sentence. Everyone who does evil—it's more than they just don't like it—they, what's the word? Hate it. They hate the light. "Oh, turn off the light, please. Here comes Jim with his talk about Christ. Stop." And they won't come into the light. They don't want to embrace the Son of God. They don't want to become children of God for fear that their deeds will be exposed. And I kind of like my sin, and I don't want you messing with my life. So butt out and take your Christ with you, and I'm not interested.

And that's big. I feel good about being obedient, being an ambassador of Christ. I feel good that the message is so positive. What I don't feel good about is the fact that it doesn't generally get a good reception when I bring it up. Matter of fact, a lot of people go, "Not interested in your Christ stuff." That's a problem. Now, here's my fear, and I don't want to turn this into a downer sermon. I'm not trying to preach a downer sermon. I just don't want you to be hurt with unmet expectations at Christmastime.

Because we can all come in here, the Compass locker room, and we're like, "Yeah, go get 'em," and we break, and out the doors we go. And this week, at the office party and at that extended-family party, "Hey, we're Christ, Christ," and then all of a sudden—"Oh, thanks, Pastor Mike, that was a great Christmas we had." I don't want that to happen to you. So I want, number two, to realize that we are trying to point to Christ in a dark world. I'm pointing to the light in a dark world. And so, when it comes to my expectations for the holidays, here's what I want to do. I want to, number two, manage them. Manage your expectations. Let's get them a little bit more realistic than the little plastic picture of the Christmas card and the happy family and everybody saying, "Jesus Christ, everything's good."

It isn't always good when you bring this up at the family gathering. Have you noticed? And I'm trying to encourage you to bring it up this Christmas. What's that going to do to your family gathering? "Oh, here he goes again." Stop. Hurt somebody. It ain't going to work out so well in a lot of your experiences. As a matter of fact, it's going to bring onto you some of the issues of strained relationships, offense, all that. It's going to happen. It's going to happen.

Now, there are only a few people here, but let me briefly talk to you who kind of enjoy conflict—and you know who you are. You like being the outcast. You revel in the fact that nobody in your family likes you and everybody at the office thinks you're a nut. I mean, you go out there and you see there's a badge and "Yay, I'm suffering for Christ." What do I say to you folks? The goal is for us not to be perceived as these pejorative angry people, okay? As a matter of fact, when we give an answer, 1 Peter 3 says, to the hope that is in us as we celebrate Christmas, we're to do it with gentleness—or diplomacy—and respect, okay? Our goal is not to try and go and be offensive this year at all of our Christmas stuff. That's not the goal.

Most of you—and I'm only talking to 5 percent of you right now—most of us, we don't want to give offense. That's why we're afraid to bring it up. But some of you say, "I kind of like that." It's not about that. You guys need more gentleness and more respect. I want to respect the people that I'm trying to talk to about Christ this Christmas. I want to be careful with them. I don't want to shut up. I don't want to stop pointing people to Christ. But I just want to do it with diplomacy. I want them, if they're going to stumble over this thing, to stumble over the fact that Christ is going to call them to lay down their idols and their sin. I don't want them to stumble over what a jerk I am. And there's a big difference there, and some of us don't see the distinction, and we need to.

But we need to recognize that the expectations we have—even the best-intentioned people—we're oftentimes going to strain relationships because we're bringing up Christ. And I'm thinking, It's Christmas. And though the world's thinking, "Well, I don't know, can we do Christmas without Christ?" we're going to say, "Is Christmas? No, not really." No, we're kind of going to talk about Christ because that's what Christmas is all about. But you're going to have some issues. And you and I just need to go into the Christmas season with a little bit of an expectation that that's the reality. That's what's going to happen. And I'm going to be okay with that.

You do realize that even non-Christians at this time of year, they start looking to Christmastime and they're filling their minds with all these expectations. They can't pull off a good conversation with a family member that lives across the country in July, but they're thinking because it's December somehow it's going to work out. And the world is filled with frustration and disappointment and unmet expectations in December. I just don't want to join that group. Because I'm going in trying to point people to the light, and people that I'm pointing to the light, they love darkness by and large. There may be some that are prepped. But I'm saying, "Hey, this is about Christ for us and our family," and I just know that that's going to be a bit of an issue.

So I don't want to end up in January going, "Oh man, that was so terrible." I want to at least go in knowing it's going to be hard. It's going to be hard. It's an opportunity, but it's going to be hard. It's going to be a bit of a struggle, and it may bring up some of those old wounds that have come up before with our co-workers. We're going to have that. Matter of fact, Jesus said this: when you have that kind of acceptance of the reality that people aren't going to think you're the keenest person in the office because you're bringing up Christ at Christmas, please just remember these words from John chapter 15. Let's turn there. We're in John still, aren't we? Are we in John 3? Let's go to John 15.

Here were the disciples starting to get the fact that, yeah, yeah, man, this is not popular. And we thought it would be. It's such a good message. I feel good about being obedient as a bearer of this

message. Now I'm pointing people to the light, and people don't like it. Matter of fact, some people are really mad at us. They're angry with us. And Jesus said this in verse 18, John 15, verse 18—here's what he said, and it helped them. He says, "Guys, remember this. If the world hates you," because some people were starting to pick up stones and throw them at the disciples, "keep in mind that it hated me first."

Now, think about this. That's an important perspective builder. I'm going to go and point people to the person that I want them to embrace—Christ—and I'm saying, "Hey, you need to embrace Christ." Christ was the one born in Bethlehem who grew up and increasingly built a hostile crowd of enemies and opponents that ended up hanging him on a Roman execution rack and murdering him. That's what the opinion polls thought of Christ. And I am trying to go in and point people to Christ, thinking that they're going to think higher of me than they did of the person I'm pointing to?

If the world hates you, if you're estranged at a dinner, if people in the office don't understand you, please remember they didn't understand me either. They didn't treat me kindly all the time either. If they hated you, just remember, they hated me first. Verse 19: "If you belong to the world"—now, if you were just like them and you weren't pointing people to the light, you were trying to crawl into the dark corners like everybody else—"it would love you as its own because you'd be just like them. But as it is, you don't belong to the world. You have been," I love this phrase, "chosen out of the world."

We are the church of the living God. And I say this, and some of you have heard this a lot of times, but the word church itself in Scripture—*ekklesia*, from *ek*, "out of," and *kaleo*, "to call"—is a compound where it simply means we're called out from the world. We've been given a task. We are the *ekklesia* of the world. We're the called-out ones, and we've been given the task of pointing people to Christ. You're not like them. You've got a job. When you walk into your office Christmas party, when you go to that gathering, when you do that party or that thing or that dinner, you're there, especially at this opportune time of Christmas, to point people to Christ. That's your job. You're chosen now.

Now, you could fit in just fine in the corner if you were like the world, but you're not called to sit in the corner. You're called out of the world. And that, unfortunately, is why the world hates you. Verse 20: "Remember the words I spoke to you: No servant is greater than his master." So get off your little high-horse thought that you can be loved and appreciated and adulated, everybody think you're great, when they thought that Christ wasn't. "If they persecuted me, they'll persecute you also."

And if you're at this point going, "This is a wonderfully encouraging Christmas message. Thank you so much, Pastor Mike—just what I expected from Pastor Mike," then bracket this phrase off in the bottom of verse 20, because this will help. Here's some encouragement for you in the midst of all this managed expectation: "If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." Now, there's some encouragement. Because did everyone reject Christ and hate him? Answer: no. There were some that said, "I will go and I'll follow you and I'll do what you say."

When Christ walked up to people and said, "Hey, you follow me. Fishers of men—that's what I'm going to make out of you," I'm sure a lot of people said, "No thanks," right? Luke chapter 9, a lot of people said that to Christ. But then there were those like Peter, James, and John who said, "You got it. We'll leave this career. We'll walk away. Fine. We'll follow you wherever you want to go, and we'll

do what you say." And Christ says, you know, I know that the large majority of the world is going to say, "Forget it. I'm not interested in coming out of the darkness and embracing the light of the world because it's going to mean changes for me." But here's the thing: there are some that did.

Like the guy who's writing this letter, the Apostle John, who was once just some lowlife fisherman out there doing his thing, living for himself. But then God called him out, and he became a faithful follower, a fruitful participant in the kingdom of God. And he said, if they did that when I approached them—and certainly you are an example of that—then you know what? There's going to be some that do that when you point people to the light. And there's some encouragement. Because you may have some people in the office go, "Oh, here he comes. I don't want to hear about Christ." And there's going to be others, though, that say, you know what? God has been prepping my life. They won't say that, but that'll be the truth. God has been preparing them, and they are there at a place where they're ready to hear what you've got to say.

And there will be people whose lives are changed if you and I are willing to point to the light this December. And in January, it may be, yeah, we strained eight or nine relationships. But you know, there were two people there that now—one is right at the doorstep; the other one has put his trust in Christ and repented of his sins—and we're going to be able to celebrate, just like in heaven, the Bible says, where they throw a party for the one sinner that repents. And they're going to be really excited about the fact that lives have been changed by the gospel again.

Or we can sit in the corner and go, "You know, I don't want to bring it up and offend anybody." And if we do that, we're going to get into January and have nothing but frustration and tiredness and the bills and all that, but not the fruit of kingdom work—of pointing people to Christ and having maybe one or two of them respond. Let's get excited about the potential. Manage your expectation. Because even if you do have that wonderful sense of accomplishment that God has used you to reach someone for Christ this December, you're going to have a few people that are going to go, "Oh, yep, I've learned a lot of things about Jim. He's kind of freaky. He's always talking about Christ." You're going to have that too. So manage your expectations, okay?

I love what Tozer said about the whole issue of expectations. He's talking about the lordship of Christ. He says, "You know what? When Christ is your Lord, it's going to invite trouble from a hostile world. And add to that the temptations of the devil and a lifelong struggle with sin, and it's going to become obvious"—I love this phrase—"that we'll need to defer most of our enjoyments to a more appropriate time." And if you and I are looking for the Norman Rockwell moment, right, just remember, we're going to have a string of them in the kingdom. Right now, though, maybe our little Christmas dinners with our extended family and those people that do not embrace the light, and I'm pointing them to Christ with diplomacy and gentleness and respect, maybe those don't become the Rockwell moments that I wanted, or the Kodak moments where everybody's hugging and everything's great.

Then just remember this. We, like Tozer said so well, maybe just need to recognize that most of our best Christmas celebrations will be on the other side of this life, okay? So let's just manage our expectations. The best Christmas celebrations are going to be there, not here. Here, we've got a job. We've got the sign, and we're pointing people to the light. Manage your expectations as you approach this December, because we're in a dark world.

Okay, so this sounds like a real downer. Ditch all my positive expectations of wonderful moments around the table with my family? Going to point to Christ, get people to hate me? That doesn't sound good. As we shift here to what we should get excited about, now please know that joy, especially now in a world that's laden with sin, is something that is quite elusive when you're aiming at it. And that's the problem we often have. What I've just spelled out for you really is setting you up for the most joyful December you've ever had. The problem is, it may not be the merriest Christmas you've ever had.

And you're not going to go around singing, "It's the most wonderful time..." and you've just made a few enemies at the office and your sister-in-law thinks you're crazy. You're not going to be singing, "It's the most wonderful time of the year." And yet you may go into January saying, "That was the most joyful season of all." Joy is elusive. If you're aiming at it, you'll miss it. See, joy comes from really putting ourselves into the roles that God has for us and being faithful in those roles. It is—Bob and I were talking before the service about this great Greek word *teleios*—there's a word *teleios* that has the sense of being just right, but it's not always at the top of the list of things.

For instance, when we have the best, the most *teleios* December of all, it'll feel perfect, but it won't be the most perfect December of all. Are you tracking with that? It'll be something that brings me the most joy, but it may be filled with some difficult times, because the joy is found in something else. It's not found by aiming at it. It's found by being faithful and attaining to a sense of completion that I have when I say, "That was what December was supposed to be for me. That was a time of being faithful to the call of God to point people's attention to Jesus Christ. That was a time for me to make the most of the opportunity and see God use me in a good way as everyone's talking about Christmas carols and the little baby in a manger."

And so here's what I want to say. I may have painted this picture—wow, that doesn't sound like a good Christmas. That'll be the best Christmas you ever had if you focus on this, because here comes where the joy comes from. Number three on your outline, okay? God has called us—and I recognize, against the backdrop of a dark world, this may sound like, wow, it comes with a lot of price tags. It does. But Christ has called us the light of the world. And in calling us the light of the world, we have the privileged position of—let's jot this down, number three—representing the truth. And no one else has that high calling. We are called in this world to represent the truth.

Turn with me, if you would, to the passage where Jesus calls us the light of the world. Now, it's interesting—this is Matthew chapter 5. In Matthew chapter 5, let's look at the context of this and see where it takes us. He's got some very applicable and pragmatic things to say to us when we adopt the mindset that my job is to represent the truth in a dark world. Look at what he says in this text. And while you're turning there, and it's familiar to you, at least the first part, where he says you're the light of the world—now remember, when Jesus talked about himself, especially as John records it in the Gospel of John, he often refers to himself as the light of the world. But sometimes he prefaces it with this phrase, "While I'm in the world, I'm the light of the world." Now that's interesting. But then he lays on his disciples, "You are the light of the world."

Now that's interesting, and it's different, and it shifts the feel of this. The responsibility changes here a little bit. Take a look at it with me. Matthew chapter 5—are you there? Matthew 5. Drop down to verse

number 14. Here's where we find it, "light of the world." He says, verse 14, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill—it can't be hidden." And that's the way it ought to be. You ought to be out there. You ought to be distinctive. You ought to be seen. Verse 15: "Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."

"In the same way, let," now circle this, "your light"—I mean, just circle the personal pronoun—"your light shine before men, so that they may see your good deeds and praise," we hope and pray, "your Father in heaven" one day, and maybe even now as they become converted. But that's different. So far, I've said, "Hey, let's point everybody to Christ," and that is a lower hurdle than saying, "Now you are the light of the world. You now are to represent truth." Christ has ascended. He's back to the Father. He's at the right hand of the Majesty on high. We're left here. And Jesus said, "While I'm on the earth, I'm the light of the world. But now you guys are the light of the world."

Now, obviously, I'm not light on the same—photonic scale, or whatever—as Christ. I just made that word up. But I have an opportunity to emanate some luminescence in this world because Christ is there and gone from this planet. And he says to me, I now am the light of the world. And therefore I've got to—and you've got two subpoints here, and they're very simple, and you may have already put them down—I need to do it in two ways. I am to represent the truth, letter A—what does this text say?—they may see your what? Deeds, right? Let's just put it this way. I am to represent the truth, first of all, by my actions, my deeds, my life.

And it now becomes the emanation of luminescence—I don't know why I'm saying that phrase—but I'm shining light, that's a fancy way to say it. I'm shining light, and people now are looking to me, okay? Wow, is that how it's supposed to work? Absolutely. I point people to Christ, but if you want to see the truth represented on this earth, look at me. Now that's uncomfortable, right? Because maybe you've got the earphones on and you've got the sign, pointing people to Christ this December, right? You've got the arrow, you see the guy. Now, that's one thing to say, "Hey, go check out the models at Joe's Apartments down the street." It's a little different to say, "Oh, why don't you come over to my house and you can look at my apartment." Do you see the difference there?

I don't want—certainly, by the looks of things, I usually don't want to visit that guy's apartment, right? I'll go see the models down the street, but I don't think you're the guy to model an apartment. And yet the Scripture says, I know December is about pointing to Christ. You know what it's also about? It's about people looking at your life as your light shines and they see the truth lived out in your life. And that ups the ante and makes us just a little bit more uncomfortable because now all of a sudden I have a responsibility to be distinctive in my behavior. I am now to represent the truth by my behavior. And there's no better time than December, because in December we're thrown into situations that we're not normally thrown into—social settings and office parties and extended families and all that stuff—in places where they're seeing my life on a level they don't normally see my life. Am I right?

Some of you have meals with people you never have meals with the rest of the year, but you'll have meals with them this month. You will be in social settings with co-workers, some of you, where you're never in social settings with them before, and now your life and their life are in a whole different setting, and now their eyeballs are on you, and now all of a sudden God is saying, "I want you to

represent the truth. Let your light so shine before men that they can see your good deeds." Now I've got to say, wow, I want my life to reflect the truth.

Let me give you some practicals. Turn with me to 1 Thessalonians. 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. If you're in Matthew, it's almost to the end of the book where the books start getting really small. But they're easy to find because the five T's are together. Remember that? First Thessalonians, Second Thessalonians, First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus. There's your string of five T's. And if you find the T books, turn to T1. First Thessalonians, chapter 5. Is that stuff in his notes, you think? No, it's not. Just making that up as we go. But maybe that's helpful for you.

First Thessalonians chapter 5. Again, steeped in the analogy of light. Look at verse 5—5:5. "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We don't belong to the night or to the darkness. So then," underline this phrase, "let us not be like others." Great. It's already hard to point people to the light. Now I've got to be a freak and be different in the way I live? Okay. I'm not asking you to be purposefully geeky, goofy, bizarre, freak-boy, right? I'm not asking you to be as tweaked as you can be. I am asking you, though, to live your lives and to do things that are distinctive, reflecting the values of the light, the Holy One—to be Christlike.

And Christ lived a different kind of life. He says, "Let us not be like others, who are asleep," verse 6, "but let us be"—here are some words—"alert and self-controlled." We've got our passions in check. We're living our lives carefully. Verse 7: those who are asleep, they sleep at night; those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith—fidelity, faithfulness, trust—and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation like a helmet.

You're going to walk into social settings this December and you're going to have to gear up and get ready to live a distinctive kind of life, a Christlike life, where your attitudes and actions are a little bit different than theirs because you're reflecting the light, Christ's, and you become a light in that dark place. Which means, like Christ, you're not laughing at all the jokes they're laughing at. You have a little different definition of recreation than they do. Your idea of fun is not quite the same as their idea of fun. Do we have to be as purposefully bizarre and goofy as we possibly can be? No. But we do need to have some values that we don't violate, some lines that we don't cross. We're not trying, like so many Christians today, to get as close to worldliness as we can without crossing the line. We're trying to live in a dark world with a distinctive kind of life.

Which, by the way, is more than just not doing things. Some of you thought of all things, "Okay, I guess I won't do all those things that they do at the office party." Here's what I'm saying: you do a lot of things that they don't do as well. Think about that, right? Think how often Jesus is willing—and I love this phrase and I use it a lot—to go the extra mile, stay the extra hour, or spend the extra dollar. Jesus was willing to do it because he was a servant of the Father, and therefore a servant of those people, which, by the way, is the same way the Apostle Paul represents himself. I am a servant of God, a *doulos* of God, a slave of God, and therefore I'm a servant of you.

And think about you in those settings—whether with extended family or your co-workers or your friends or the neighborhood thing that's going on. When you're willing to go the extra mile, stay the extra hour, or spend the extra dollar, and you reflect the generosity and the sacrificial nature of a

servant, do you think you'll be distinctive? Oh yeah. You will be different. You will stand out. And that's exactly what Jesus said: let your light so shine before people that they can see your good deeds. Because what's the goal? We want them to embrace the light and become children of God. We want them to see the distinction so that they might have their sins forgiven and, with their Creator, be right so that they don't have to incur the wrath of God. They can receive one blessing after another. John 1, right? That's what we want to do. That's what we want to see.

So therefore, my life—I've got to be on my good behavior. I've got to make sure I'm living a careful, controlled, alert, self-controlled, bridled life, a thoughtful Christian life. I'm not like everybody else. I can't be like everybody. But you know what? Not only the things I don't do, but there are a lot of things I do do and I'm willing to do that they're not willing to do. And in so doing, I reflect the nature, character, and sacrifice of Christ. If you do that this Christmas, they'll notice. Because you know how people, in the midst of the pressure of all the holiday stuff, start getting really short with their temper, really short with their willingness to get involved, all of that? If we can be distinctive there, we'll be shining brightly before men. So make sure that your life is different. Make sure it's not like everybody else's.

I'm not talking about being freaky or bizarre. I'm talking about being distinctively godlike, Christlike. And by that I mean your life is distinctively good. It's righteous. Which, by the way, let me sidebar here, Your Honor: when you sin in front of your—whatever these circles are you're in, your extended family or whatever—please, godliness... I love this about the Old Testament. "The righteous man falls seven times, but he gets up." See? People who are righteous, they're not sinless. But what they are is people who are willing to admit they're wrong. David, King David in the Old Testament—was he a sinner? Absolutely. But you know, God says he's a man after my own heart because when God put the conviction on his life, what did he do? He openly confessed and repented. And I'm telling you, when you fail in front of the people that you're trying to live a godly life in front of, just please do what righteous people do while they're still encased in sinful flesh. We fail, but we come back and we ask for forgiveness. We confess our sin. That's what we're talking about.

And even in doing that, you'll be distinctive with your actions. Represent the truth—how do you do that? With your actions. There's another part to this, and it's clearly not just with your deeds. There's another part that comes along with representing the truth in your life, and it's not just deeds. It's also what? Words. It's what you say, okay? Let me show this to you in Ephesians 5, after you write it down. Letter B: with your words. Represent the truth with your words. And now—and again, we've upped the ante here—it's one thing to live a righteous life in front of people and try and hope that, you know, maybe they'll get the connection between my Christianity and the good deeds or the service that I bring to the social circle or the setting. But it's another thing now for me to be prompted by God to speak up. Speak up, man. Say something.

And that, for us as Christians, sometimes is the hardest thing, particularly because we haven't calculated the cost that we talked about in the second point, and that is recognizing, you know, the expectation is here—you're going to win some, lose some. But I've got to speak up. Come Christmastime, if we're going to represent the truth, our mouth has to move. It is arguably harder, I recognize. But we've got to start talking. Where did I turn you? Ephesians 5? Okay, yeah, let's look at that text. Verse 8. Again, the light and darkness themes.

"You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light." Be like that. "For the fruit of light consists"—this is review, the first two at least—"in all goodness and righteousness." But there's another thing here that I think needs words more than the other two. And what's the third one? Truth. Truth. "And find out what pleases the Lord," which, by the way, would be a great way to prepare for all these settings that we get thrown into in December. You pray. You ask, "God, how can I please you here? Make me sensitive to doing the things and saying the things in this setting, at this party, at this event, that you want me to say that would represent you and the truth well. Let me live for you. Let me speak for you. And I want to know how to do that best. What will please you in this situation?"

"Have nothing to do," verse 11—here's not an option—"with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them," which happens not just with our lives, but it needs words sometimes. Verse 12: "For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, and everything that is illuminated becomes a light." That is why it is said—and this is apparently not an Old Testament verse, since there's no footnote that says, "Hey, this is Isaiah 22," or whatever. This is apparently an early hymn, an early Christian statement, maybe a baptismal formula that they would say as they baptized new converts. But this was something the church knew in Ephesus or the surrounding cities that got this letter. They understood this as the phrase that captured their job as Christians, which was to say something like this: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

My life ought to be able to, in some culturally relevant and applicable way, say that content to people around me. Now, don't just walk into the party this Friday night and say, "Hey, wake up, sleepers, arise from the dead, let Christ shine on you," because someone inevitably will. But there's a way to say those things to people, and we've got to open our mouths, praying, "God, please, how do I please you in getting that message across?" Now look at the message. Look what I'm saying. I'm saying it to people that are not awake. They're asleep, right? Now, I know in Ephesians 2 it says that we're dead in our transgressions and sins. But the analogy here is how light wakes people up.

Now, in college we had a way of waking people up with lights—two in the morning, oftentimes—just to see their reaction, with eight guys surrounding them, screaming. And we had a little game called "Train." Did you do that in college? This is not the fruit of righteousness or goodness. But there's a way to wake people up with lights that's startling and abrasive and offensive, and then there are ways to do it that aren't. Now, sometimes you've got to get them up because it's time to get up, and if they don't get up, they're in trouble. My roommate sometimes would have to wake me up. I was late for class. He'd say, "Oh no, Mike's overslept. Wake up, Mike." Got to do that. There are ways to do that.

But you're inevitably stuck with two things, and those are really not working in your favor when it comes to waking people up. People that are asleep usually like sleep. It feels good. Like Christ said in John 3, they love darkness. They like that. And light is, secondly, not their friend. They don't want to have this thing expose them, which this passage says will eventually lead them to forsake their idols and relinquish their sin and walk in obedience to Christ. But we've got to get this message across. And we've got to be saying to these people, "Your life can change. You can be a child of God. You've got to embrace the light. You've got to wake up from your slumber, if you will, and you've got to let Christ shine on you." This is, again, something we say. This is not just something we do.

That's why it said, "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Well, that sounds hard. That sounds tricky. How do I say that in a culturally relevant way? How do I do it with respect and kindness like you said in 1 Peter 3? Well, look at verses 15 and 16. Maybe they're helpful for us. "Be very careful, then, how you live"—that means thoughtful; the old word was *circumspect*. We think about it. We have to ponder it. We have to strategize. "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise, but as wise," sitting there, you know, fist on your chin going, "Hmm, I've got these things going on this December—opportunity to point to Christ, opportunity to represent the truth. How do I do that? Let me think that through."

"Making the most," I love this, verse 16, "of every opportunity." Do you have some opportunities this December you don't have in November? Yeah. Or June? Yes. We have them. Make the most of them because—here's the urgency—"the days are evil." It's needed, what Paul's saying to the Ephesians, now more than ever, and we never know when it's going to be too late. As Jesus said, "The night is coming, a time when no man can work." And the point of the analogy is that we are still shining brightly here. At some point, the lights are all going to be extracted, and the world will be really, truly, profoundly dark, because the light of the world is gone and the lights of the world are gone. And the point is, man, I don't know how much time we have left. This December, let's get to work at representing Christ, making the most of every opportunity.

I don't know how often you do the questions on the back of the worksheet. I give them to you every week, and some of our small groups, of course, attack those every week. But maybe if you've never done it, this would be a week to just look at those questions. And you and God, or maybe you and your wife, or you and your family, if your kids are old enough, just walk through those questions. Or maybe you want to join one of our small groups, our home fellowship groups, and go through these questions. But it would be a great, great, great week, as we approach all of these activities—maybe some of you are going to one tonight. So you've got an assignment at lunch. Go through these questions and get to the place where you, like this text encourages you to do, make the most of every opportunity.

As the verse said there in verse 10, "finding out what pleases the Lord," let us prepare to make a difference because you are the light of the world. Absolutely. I think in Southern California it's interesting to watch, and I love it because there are such tall, tall trees. But I love the fact that some people, occasionally, wrap their Christmas lights around those big, tall palm trees. I don't know how they do it. I'm for the no-one-over-40-on-a-ladder rule, but they somehow do it. Maybe they hire people to do it. But sometimes you'll see just maybe on an embankment or in somebody's yard, and you've got a lot of darkness behind it, and there are a lot of trees, but then there's that one palm tree that's got all those lights all the way up to the top. And you see how distinct it is.

That tree—you'd never see it at night. It would blend in. It would be nothing. But it's just encased, it's enwrapped in light. And I think to myself as I watch those things, that's exactly what God is calling us to do because the days are evil, they're dark, and God needs people like you and me to stand up this December and point people to the reason for this whole thing called Christmas, and to say that we, as representatives of Christ, want you to wake up and embrace him. And that's our job. And if you do that, your life is going to stand out like that palm tree, like lights in a dark place.

I hope this Christmas, maybe just because you've sat here for the last 40 minutes, maybe you see those lights tonight when the sun sets and that big ball of fire is going to set over the horizon over there, and now everybody's going to pop these lights on on their streets, and whether you've got yours on or not, whether you've got them up at your house or not, I hope as you drive down the street or look out your window and you see those—house that's got them and a house that doesn't, house that's got them, or on my street, house that's got them, house that's got them, house that's got them, Mike's doesn't, house that's got them—however it is on your block, can you just say—and I hope you never look at them the same—"I'm called to be that." Because really, in our spiritual landscape, not many people have their lights out. But it's time for us as Christians to let our light shine, both in actions and in words. So let's make a difference for Christ this December.

Pray with me, please. God, help us, please, to be the kinds of people that you've called us to be—ambassadors representing you in a dark world. And God, our message, it's good. It's really, really good. We can become children of God. Every person in our office could reach the place of repentance and faith and become children of the Creator of heaven and earth. But God, they need us to speak up. Like Paul said there in the book of Romans, how are they going to hear if no one opens their mouth and starts talking about it? So God, loosen our lips this December. Let us be good representatives of the truth. Let our light shine, not only with our words, but with our deeds as well. Let us prove by our behavior that Christ has gotten hold of our lives and changed us.

God, we thank you for this opportunity. Let us make the most of it. And may in January, as the decorations all come down and the lights all come down, may we be able to testify that our lights have not come down and we're continuing to shine. And the fruit of shining in this dark culture, in this dark world, has made a difference for many people. God, do that. Let us bear much fruit in this dark place. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.