

Light:

Why Lights Can't Help but Shine Through Darkness



I pick up trash now.

I didn't use to do it, but now I do. I pick up trash at my house, at work, in airports, on sidewalks, in streets, and in bathrooms. In all these places, I find little bits of refuse that sit idly by. They wearily eye each passerby like a cautious puppy in a dog pound—tinged with fear but also waiting in anticipation for the man or woman who will be the one to take them home. Trash, after all, likes to be in a trash can.

This habit has become somewhat annoying because I have become a little legalistic about it, but it all started with good intentions when I moved into a new apartment in Los Angeles. My landlord had given me advance warning about all of the paper, but I hadn't paid much attention at the time. Soon enough, though, my front porch, my screen door, and the common area at our building were littered with every conceivable type of printed advertisement. Local eateries, barbershops, newspapers, nail salons—they all wanted my business, and they weren't shy about asking for it over and over again.

I felt as if the world was a funnel into which some supernatural being making six bucks an hour was tossing advertisements, and my building was at the bottom of it. All of that waste got really ridiculous. I shave my own head, and I like my work, so I don't need a barber. And I certainly don't need a place to have my nails done. You would also think if I wanted *The Los Angeles Times*, I would have ordered it by now.

The flyers, strewn across the ground outside my front door, soon began to catch my eye. They weren't put on the ground to begin with, as you might imagine. Advertisers are far too sophisticated to simply pile trash outside customers' homes. Instead, they stuff their flyers into the screen doors of every unit in the building.

But these were no ordinary flyers. They must have been rebellious and discontent because before long, they headed out on their own, jumping down from their safe screen-door perches and venturing into the unknown wilderness of concrete. They wandered aimlessly at first, headbanging in concert with the rock-and-roll of a stiff breeze, but ultimately they just decided to hang around with one another in the common area outside my door.

I began my annoying habit by picking up only the flyers I knew were my own; they were often the closest to my door. Before long, I began to notice that my neighbors had no such inclinations. I would see a neighbor's flyer one day, and it would still be there the next day. Day after day would go by, and this litter would become a fixture, having thrown off its rebellious youthfulness for the allure of settling down. These bits of trash became acquaintances, much like guys at the office whose names I can't remember. And each day, as I came home from work or school, I walked by and nodded in their direction, never wanting to stop for any length of time to talk but always good for a quick "what's up?" I ignored them for weeks until finally a thought struck me as I nodded once more in their direction.

*You are the light of the world.*¹

What? What does that have to do with trash on the ground? Did being the light of the world mean I was supposed to set the trash on fire? No, that didn't make any sense, although I did set the building's dumpster on fire once, which is an entirely different story. But as I thought about that verse a little more, I soon realized I was just like my neighbors, nearly indistinguishable in behavior from them, at least in this one little way. If my neighbors left their flyers on the ground each day and just walked right on by, not willing to deal with something they knew they probably should, then how should I be different from them?

I know I'm supposed to be set apart, like being holy, and that being the light of the world is my charter for divergence from the customs and behaviors of the world. Jesus is telling me something about how to be different, how to shine for Him in a darkened culture.

So I decided to start being different from my neighbors by picking up their trash. Each day, as I walked past these flyers, I quickly bent over and picked them up. It was a small act of obedience, one that I don't think anyone ever saw. I'm pretty sure no one ever received salvation because of my actions either. But that's not the point. This was one small decision I could make each day to live differently, to be faithful to Jesus' expectation that I be a light to this world.

I draw some inspiration for this from C.S. Lewis. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis offers this thought:

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature

or a hellish creature; either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. . . Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.²

If Lewis is right, then deciding to pick up trash as an act of obedience was one step in my progression of becoming a heavenly creature in harmony with God and others. This is undoubtedly a good thing, but ultimately, picking up trash is a superficial action that doesn't get at the depths of my heart. I want to be set apart and heavenly, to be a creature that craves God and gets along with myself and everyone else, but this desire doesn't seem to be backed up by my actions. I don't even like some people, including myself at times. And I know that's a reflection on the love I have for God too.

If I don't always get along with others, or even God, then evidently every day I make choices that are turning me into a hellish creature. And these choices are in conflict with my longings for more of God in my life. As I reflected on these thoughts, I was reminded of trash. I have all sorts of spiritual debris in my life, and I'm often like my neighbors, walking right on by, not willing to deal with it even though I know I should.

I thought of all the leaks through my windows and remembered how much garbage I had allowed to pile up in my home, never fully realizing what I had been letting in. As I spent time in silence, I also found more trash beyond the indecent pictures on the floor and the people and noise in every room, and some of this trash is stuff I've brought in right through the front door.

I spend my money on needless wants, things that feel like needs, without really ever considering that someone else in the world has a real need for water, food, a place to sleep, school books, medicine, or a Bible. I have a tendency to think I am better than most of the people I meet, but in fact, I know nothing about them, and if I did, I would probably find

many of them to be kinder, wiser, and more genuine than me. I am also pretty self-centered, and many of the decisions I make at home, like how I want to spend my free time or whether Anna should get up and get us drinks instead of me, are largely driven by what I want rather than my consideration of others.

I could go on and on, but the bottom line is that a lot of garbage is piling up inside, and all of this behavior lies stinking on my floor. So Lewis is right; I do have hundreds of little choices to make each day, opportunity after opportunity, to either add to my dump or take away from it.

One such opportunity came to me in the airport in Denver. As I waited for my flight, I found an airline coupon I had been carrying around in my bag for more than a year. I kept it folded up in my little leather ticket holder my mom bought for me in high school. The coupon did not fit exactly; it stuck out to the side just a bit. It also had some weird sticky residue on it, and I'm not sure what it actually was. Regardless, this coupon was good for a one-way upgrade to first class, which was a pretty good deal.

As I read through the information on the coupon, I noticed it would expire soon. I was on my way to Eagle, Colorado, to go snowboarding with Anna and my aunt, uncle, and cousins. And I was tired, a condition in which I am almost guaranteed to be feeling self-centered. So I decided to cash in my coupon and enjoy a moment of luxury after a hard week at work.

Then I had that thought again: *You are the light of the world*. Dang it, this was bad timing. I really wanted to slump into a nice, cushy first-class seat and ignore everyone else on the flight. I didn't want to be a light, but I knew what Jesus wanted me to do, and I decided this might be an opportunity to make a choice to become a little less hellish and a little more heavenly.

So I walked up to the gate agent, smiled at her, and said, "Hi. Is there first-class service on this flight?"

She glanced up at me slowly. She was clearly tired. "Yes."

"Great. Is there room available?"

Another tired look. "No, but I can put you on the waiting list."

"Okay, thanks." I waited as she typed on her computer.

She glanced back up at me and said, "How would you like to pay for this?" I handed her my coupon. It was hard to hand over, not because it was sentimental to me, but because it was sticky.

As she read the coupon and began typing again, I leaned in and quietly said, "If a seat opens up, and you move me to first class, can you give the seat to someone else?" She looked back up at me blankly. "I don't really need the seat. I'd rather someone else have it. But don't tell them who gave it to them; just let it be a surprise."

At this point, her face no longer looked tired. Instead, she looked confused. She didn't really even say anything back to me. She just made a funny face that would have embarrassed her if she had seen it herself, looked at the ground, then back up at me, then back at the ground again. After a few more seconds, the situation became extremely uncomfortable, so I decided to walk away.

Before the flight boarded, she came over to inform me that airline policy did not allow for the transfer of seats between passengers, and it didn't matter because no first-class seats opened up anyway. But that was all right; I actually enjoyed the awkwardness of the experience. I find great satisfaction in doing or saying something that is completely unexpected, and I felt a little more heavenly because of my choice. You could argue that these feelings of joy were mixed with pride, and you would be right. But it was still satisfying to make a small choice that turned the part of me that chooses into a more heavenly creature. Before my onset of pride,

I did have a desire to bless someone else, to be a glimmer of light to a darkened plane.

I suppose Lewis could have made the same point he did about choosing by using this picture of being a light, that every time we make a choice, we are bringing the central part of us, the part of us that chooses, into more of the light or more of the darkness. The world we all live in is like a pitch-black room with one brilliant lamp at its center, and the only way we can know what the works of our hands are like is by bringing them underneath the light. With each choice we make, we inch either closer to the light or farther away from it.

I think this is what Paul meant when he wrote that we should “take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them...when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible.”³ The metaphor makes sense because we can’t see anything we do in the dark. But for a long time, I wondered what this light stood for, particularly since Jesus told us we are the light of the world.

I looked in the Scriptures and found passages that shed some, um, light on this question. Light and darkness are often used as metaphors for the righteous and the wicked, but the Old Testament only ascribes the term to one person, and that person is God. David says, “The LORD is my light and my salvation,” and “your word [O LORD] is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”⁴ Isaiah continued these descriptions of God with prophetic words concerning the Messiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” and “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”⁵

So when the apostle John calls Jesus “the light [that] has come into the world,” and later says of His Father, “God is light,” we aren’t too surprised.⁶ Even when Jesus says, “I am the light of the world,” the only people who

were hacked off about it were the Pharisees. But Jesus knew exactly what He was saying: He was claiming to be the promised Messiah.

Jesus' claim was a bold one, to be sure, but the truly scandalous statement was the one we have already discussed—His statement that *we* are the light of the world. Wait, if God is light, and Jesus is the light of the world, how are we also the light of the world?⁷

My brother, Scott, once told me a story that paints a picture of what being the light of the world might look like in our lives. Scott was an officer in the United States Marine Corps for five years. He was an infantry officer for two years and a Special Forces officer for two years. Then he got married, and for his final tour of duty as a Marine, he took a job as a regional recruiter working in downtown Portland, Oregon, where his wife, Tracy, was attending Reed College.

Reed has a gorgeous campus, terribly intelligent students, and a wide array of annual events and festivals, including Renn Fayre. Originally intended to honor and relive the Renaissance, Renn Fayre has morphed into something different. This is how Reed officially describes Renn Fayre:

Currently, Renn Fayre is a campus-wide end-of-the-year festival. On the last day of classes the seniors march from the steps of the library to the registrar's office to celebrate turning in their theses and to be congratulated by the president. This thesis parade kicks off a weekend-long celebration with music, food and drink, sports, arts and crafts, and fireworks.⁸

Reed's website does not mention that Renn Fayre also incorporates a number of other less innocent traditions. Naked students paint themselves in blue and run around the campus. Raves, lit up by the burning arcs of glow sticks, saturate the night with revelry. Drinking is a given, and drugs are as common as Cheetos.

During the 2003 edition of Renn Fayre, a rumor was going around that undercover Feds were going to be on campus to bust students who were getting high, and all the students were buzzing about it. But the show went on as planned.

One of the highlights of the festival was the evening concert series, and Scott and Tracy went to one of the concerts. As they seated themselves in the audience and waited for the show to begin, the crowd continued to fill in and slowly collected itself tightly toward the stage. The energy in the crowd rumbled like growing thunder, and before long, small puffs of smoke rose like tiny clouds, accumulating into a thunderstorm of euphoria.

Seeing what was going on around him and his wife, Scott decided he was going to break through the storm and have a little fun while doing it. So he leaned over to a group of students sitting next to him who were wrapped in smoke like shawls, and said, "Just so you know, I *am* a federal officer," which was true, because he was an officer in the Marine Corps. But the students got a different message. Soon enough, word made it around to the sections around Scott and Tracy, and the smoke cleared, leaving these two Christians in an open clearing amid a forest of smoke.

I am not saying smoking will sentence you to hell, and you might want to argue that my brother should have minded his own business. However you see it, I still find this image of an open clearing to be compelling. Perhaps every Christian's life should look like this kind of open space, set among the haze of a world that desperately wants to cloud our vision with the desire for things other than God. In fact, this image is much like the pitch-black room with a single brilliant light at its center. The outer reaches of the room are murky, but the intensity of the light brings clarity of sight.

If we are lights in the world, we should stand out. Others should be able to see and taste and smell the beautifully clear air that surrounds our souls as we journey through a smog-filled world. And we understand why Jesus

tells us, “Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.”⁹ Most people are sitting in the dark, and the Christ-followers are gathered together beneath the light, so they stand out clearly to everyone in the room.

But being a light is difficult. I just don’t have the wattage, and I tend toward the darkness more often than the light. I face the teachings of Jesus and realize my natural inclination is to step away from the glow rather than toward it.

Deny myself?¹⁰ Why would I do that? I like myself a lot, and I like to do what I feel like doing.

Turn the other cheek?¹¹ What? If someone hits me, I want to level him.

Give to those who ask?¹² Are you kidding me? You don’t know how hard I have worked for this money, and you expect me to give it away to someone else?

With every choice in my day—spending time with God or blowing Him off, serving Anna or waiting to be served, getting upset with the guy who cut me off or letting it pass, showing respect to an undeserving coworker or talking trash behind his back, helping a friend move or sitting on my couch, offering my hand to the guy with the sign by the highway or turning my head away—I decide to step toward or away from the light of Christ. And these decisions mean everything to my faith. They either harden my heart, making me a bit more hellish, or they soften my spirit, making me a bit more heavenly.

Something about these choices is powerful; they can draw me nearer to God. Coming close to a roaring campfire makes you warm. Coming close to the brilliant light of God makes you a light as well. We are wicks, and the only way we can burn bright for Christ is to come close enough to catch His fire.



So as I stand in the glow of Christ in this great, dark room, I want to move toward Him. I want to delight myself in His Word and spend time in conversation with Him, allowing His light to illuminate all the spiritual trash in my home. My cravings for Him have to overcome my fear of exposure, and they compel me to do silly things like pick up my neighbors' trash.

But the great part about drawing close to God is that He draws close to us.¹³ We may not always feel like that's true, but we have to keep taking small steps toward His light, knowing and believing that He will shine through us to the rest of this world. When we live in this spirit of awareness and anticipation, He will begin to show us all the opportunities we have to inch toward Him. We might even find ourselves picking up other people's trash, and they may ask us why we're doing it.

Shine away.