

One Candle

by: Ronald L. Dart

I have a disclaimer. I love that song, “These are the days of Elijah”, but I'm not he. I just wanted to get that clear. I'm not one of the two witnesses either. There was about fifty of them on the bus. Nearly as many as you'll see in a Miss America Pageant.

I want to thank all of you for being so good as we've begun this Feast. The warmth, the love, it's just really been a wonderful festival to this point, and I should know that it will be all the way through for me. I've come into about the warmest opening to a feast that I've ever had the privilege of attending, and that's a lot of feasts because this is number fifty for me this year.

I've often chosen, at the mid-feast sermon that I give each year, I've given a sermon to the church. I'm not going that way this year, this is not a sermon to the church, this is a sermon to you personally, individually and separately.

Now, it was odd when I began to think about it and realize that Jesus never spoke to the church as such. I hadn't thought about it, but he didn't at any time. Before him the church was a future thing. Remember what he said? I will build My church. It's future for him. And the church would be built out of individual bricks one at a time. So, while Jesus spoke to crowds, the people he was really talking to were the individuals in that crowd who would eventually form the foundation, the building blocks, the things upon which you and I have built, and later generations that we call the church. He was talking to individuals who would understand who would hear, and who would respond. Something not everyone did. Even when he drew his disciples away, and taught them privately, they were still not a church. They were each a unique individual. Each was a collection of talents, experiences, knowledge, problems, headaches, aggravations, prejudices, strengths, weaknesses. Every one of them was different. Every one of them is unique. Every one of them though brought something to the table that Jesus felt they needed to have, and he chose to work with them. He worked with them together, he worked with them separately, just as he works with all of us, together and personally.

Now, for some reason I don't fully understand, this has been on my mind in a way that it has not been before. This year I feel led to talk not to the church, but to you personally, because after all, you are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.

And these two comparisons: salt of the earth, light of the world, come from that old stand-by the Sermon on the Mount. Every young preacher gets this advice from the guys who send

him out to do his first sermon. You can't go wrong to preach on the Sermon on the mount. So it becomes familiar to all of us by default. I think these two comparisons those salt of the earth, light of the world, seem to say two different things about us. One, we are like salt scattered, not concentrated, all in one place. Two, each of us is like a candle in a very dark place.

Now, one night I was working in my study, everything was all lit up bright. You know, lights on, I had my books scattered around. I generally get books out and rarely put them away. And so I had all my books, and I was working in the study, there were no thunderstorms around, there was nothing going on, it was a cloudy night but it was in the dark of the moon. And as I worked with no clap of thunder, and no warning, all the lights went out. And you know what it's all you know, why now? Why here? Why, in this place, all of a sudden everything was dark? Now, the sharp contrast between bright light and all of a sudden, no light, is really startling. And disorienting at first. I waited a moment and it's pitch darkness. Then I carefully got out of my chair, I felt my way to the door. I know my house, so two steps, and I was able to put my hand on the door. and reach down and find the knob where it was supposed to be. Open the door stepped out and the garage is utterly black. Couldn't see my hand right up here in front of my face, so I took one step forward, and put my hand on Allie's car. I knew right where it should be, and it was there. I felt my way along toward the hood of the car, and then I calculated carefully the angle and the distance to where I knew the door should be. I took two steps across, found the door, felt around, worked my way down to the light switch should be, and past the light switch, no point to that, then to the door handle, and opened it up. Inside - pitch dark. No improvement. And so I began, I started up steps, there are about five or six steps from the garage level up into our kitchen level. As I work my way up, there was still no light. All the neighborhood was dark. There was no light coming from the neighbor's porch light as often is at night. There was just dark. So I got to the top of the stairs carefully, got the angle right, took one or two steps across to the countertop, in the kitchen, and then felt my way down to the bottom drawer, opened the bottom drawer, and got out a candle and a match. Scratched the match, lit the candle, and you know, what this is like, I have a feeling all of you have been through it.

There is that one little candle makes all the difference in the world at a time like that. It's a difference between stubbing your toe on things. It's the difference between, you know banging your head against something you'd forgotten where it was supposed to be, or wasn't where it was supposed to be, all kinds of things. Light one little candle, and your whole world changes in that moment, from pitch dark to light. And the dark cannot defeat that candle, can it? It can't quench it. Doesn't make a difference how much dark there is, that one little light sends it away, and it changes. Now a candle doesn't seem like much. But the dark cannot put it out, and that little light makes so much difference to you when you need it.

But what did Jesus mean by the analogy that each of us is like a candle? How should we take it? What should we do with it? Well, the analogy, as I said arises from the Sermon on the Mount, chapter five of Matthew, and here's the way it goes. He says several things leading up to this statement about being the light of the world. He said in verse three, "Blessed are

the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven". That's not really hard to grasp. Poor in spirit is referring to an attitude of mind. Solomon said that "the rich answer roughly, but the poor use entreaties". It's a question of the way you respond to people is what he was talking about here. It describes an honest humility in a person, and it's reflected in how we treat people. You got that? Blessed are the poor in spirit who exhibit an attitude of humility, and it shows in the way they treat people. That's important.

Now there's an odd angle about this Kingdom of Heaven idea, because we all look forward to Kingdom of Heaven, Christ returns, establishes his Kingdom on Earth, and the Kingdom of God, and all that. But there's a funny thing, if you work your way through the Kingdom parables, and any of you can do that if you've got a concordance. Just read them all, and when you get through with them you get the distinct feeling there's an awfully lot, there's a very large concept of here and now, in those Kingdom parables. I think what he is saying, you know it's not just a matter of going to heaven, or going someplace else, or something far off in the future, in a way, I think what Jesus is trying to tell us is that you represent the Kingdom of Heaven here and now. When you like that little candle, you have suddenly brought a small piece of the Kingdom of Heaven into perhaps another person's life. This is all about how we treat people.

Try another Beatitude in verse five, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth". I've always look at words carefully, because sometimes the translators don't get it right, sometimes the dictionaries can clarify, and how we look at it basically, what the word meat means is 'mild' and 'gentle'. I understand those two principles quite well. It relates closely, doesn't it, to poor in spirit. The person who is humble, who is meek, who is mild, and I love that word 'gentle' in the way we treat people, has everything to do with it. You know a mild person is a person who is easy to be with, who is a comfortable person. I daresay you could sit there for a moment you could probably tick off a list of people who fit that description. Are you one of them?

You could also find another list of people who are, what I shall I call them prickly? Oh you do know people who are prickly? There is a that distinction. I think that's important.

Now, let's try another one, Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy". Now this is a cautionary one for your file of warnings. In your judgment of other people you are often pronouncing your own sentence. Whatever it is you think should happen to that person, you maybe have wind up having it happen to you. So there's an incentive for you, if you ever needed one, to be merciful. But, once again, it's how you treat people. A merciful person is easy to be with. They are comfortable. They are a comfort. You like to be with them. You like to see them coming.

And try another one, "Blessed are the peacemakers, they should be called the children of God." Now, this is not so much a matter of trying to help two friends who are at odds reconcile. That's the way people tend to want to think about this, but they use that merely as an excuse to meddle in other people's business. That's not what this is about. It takes two to

reconcile, and you may be one of the two. If you can make peace with people with whom you are at odds, you're a peacemaker. That's what it means.

The place to start making peace is between yourself and those where that peace does not exist. It has to do with your attitude. How you conduct yourself toward other people, how you treat people and whether or not you're just a comfortable person to be with, and to be around.

So, when you think about it, it's entirely possible that you can be a quiet, mild, warm, generous light, in an otherwise very dark place, and people will be drawn to you because of it. We must not, we dare not, discount this. It's of enormous value.

Now having said all that, and more, Jesus comes down to Matthew 5:10, "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you, when men will revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: because you have suddenly found solidarity with the prophets," and with every man of God in all of history who has suffered this way because of his obedience to God. You have joined a large, mighty, wonderful band of people. Good people whom you would enjoy. You would love to be with. They would be comfortable for you. They would be a light to their surroundings, and the people who hated them, are ones to stay away from. Then he says this, and what he doesn't exactly say in this place, is that your endurance will have an effect on other people.

We have a friend, an old, old friend I haven't seen myself in years, but I know he's there in a nursing home. Actually he's at home now, he was a nursing home in Gladewater. He's diabetic, and up there suffering, and putting up with the miseries of a nursing home, and all that before he got a chance to go home, and another friend who visited him on a very regular basis, said that he went there because this guy lit up his life. He was a source of encouragement, and of strength. He thought of himself, "What in the world do I have to complain about? I go to see this guy to cheer him up and he ends up cheering me up, from a bed in a nursing home."

So you know, whatever it is that you're doing, wherever you are that you're doing it, you have an effect on other people. I don't think the fellow in the nursing home realized the extent to which he was changing the lives of people who came, and interacted with him, but he was.

You know, you don't win points in a heavenly lottery because someone treats you badly. You don't get a thing for that. The points are won in terms of your endurance, and your effect on other people, in making that endurance. Your effect, in strengthening other Christians who may have to suffer the same thing. You're effect in giving encouragement to people who say, "If he can do it, I can do it." That makes a great deal of difference, and

whenever you endure adversity, whenever you stand up against it, and overcome it, you have an effect beyond anything you can possibly know.

Paul wrote to the Philippians, we'll come back to the Sermon on the Mount in a moment, but he went right to Philippians 1:27, "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, then whether I come and see you, or whether I hear about you in my absence, I'll know that you are firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel, and not being frightened in any way by those who oppose you, this is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved."

Your not being afraid, your strength, your standing up to it, is a sign to those people that they are in a world of trouble. It's a sign of encouragement to others that God will help them through those difficulties as well.

Now, having led up to this, Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, goes on to say, "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savor wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under foot of man."

So, warning right there for all of us, it was tossed out, in a way as an encouragement, that we are the salt of the earth, but also there's a risk that we might become good for nothing. Oh, God forbid that there should let that happen how does it come about? Well, I suppose it comes about by our failure to live up to the Beatitudes. Our failure to live up to the things that Christ says throughout his ministry as you page your way through those red letter versions of the Bible. You know, not the question of what would Jesus do? But, what did Jesus say that we must do? That failure to live by that, the savor is gone. "You are the light of the world, a city that is set on a hill cannot be hid, men don't light a candle and put it under a basket they put it on a candle stick so you can give like to the whole house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven". This seems to be the task, the responsibility of every one of us no matter what we may think of ourselves, or of our place in God's Kingdom. This is it - let your light shine before men.

A little self-examination, in the light of the words of Jesus, is always a good thing for those of us who claim to be His disciples. It is time to read the book, and not think about how it describes someone else as being bad, but to look at how it describes you in your life, and how you do. Now, mind you, this sermon is not about character as such. It's really not about doctrine or arguments about new truths. In a way, what the sermon is about is a different approach to evangelism, of all things. Now I know a lot of you feel inadequate when it comes to explaining the Bible, because you told me that, again and again. Some complain that they can't remember scriptures. They say, "I read it, I understand it, and I forget it." These are understandable human limitations, and we all struggle with them in one way or another. All of us are different, but we are all of us the salt of the earth. We are all of us the light of the world. Nevertheless, some are scented candles, short, blocky you may not notice them at first, but they can change the atmosphere in a room. That's simple. Others are long,

tapered candles, they hold their light up a little higher to help to keep you from stubbing your toe on something in the dark.

Now, these are just metaphors though. How does it actually work? I want to give you an example. A friend of mine, I don't know how long I've known her, I can talk about it this year she was unable to come, so I'll mention her name to you, Jan Oldman. She won't be sitting here blushing, you know, because I'm talking about her, she'll be blushing out there probably watching the sermon, and live-streaming on the internet, she can blush there by herself. She always made it a point to visit a nursing home in her area. She would locate a couple of elderly ladies in the nursing home and she would adopt them. She would visit them on a regular schedule. She would buy them little things they needed, or wanted. They needed a hairbrush, she would bring them one. She needed, I guess maybe a lipstick, she'd bring them one. She would come and she would sit and read the Bible to them, or read other books, whatever it is that she needed. However she could warm their day, warm their life, make them feel loved, that's what Jan did, and she would do this regularly, and she paid a price for this. Think about it for a moment, you're visiting these old ladies you get they get to be almost like moms to you, and you spend all this time with them, and then they go and die. And it hurts. She would have to endure the pain of loss because of the kind of person she was, and is still, to this day. So, what she did when she lost one, she would go adopt another one and carry on. Jan was for these little old ladies, a candle in a dark place and changed the atmosphere in the room when she came in. She always makes me feel good when I see the letter from her, she has a unique way of addressing the letter, when I see it I know it's from Jan, it and I always want to read it first, because of the kind of person that she is, and it comes through. Now, I ask you this, how much is it worth to make someone feel better by just seeing you walk in the door? What's it worth? Now you know people like this. Are you one of them? Or, are you a prickly person? Are you a kind person? A gentle person that people feel good when you're around?

Now, there's also the question, of course, of how do people feel when they get a card from you? Does that mean something to them? A letter? A phone call? And my question is this really evangelism? Evangelism is an odd word in the way in our English translations of the Bible let us down because they lose so many associations that a Greek reader would have spotted, just like that.

Evangelism is a compound word from the Greek it means literally 'good message'. Combined into one word, 'good message', you know, it is rather than two words. And it got took on a meaning of its own in the early church. The word 'gospel' comes from the Greek 'evangelists', which means 'good message', and so it goes. An angel from the same root is a 'messenger'. So these words go back and forth. So my friend Jan, who visits a nursing home, is an angel when she walks in the door. It isn't necessarily her words, it is her presence, her kindness, her caring, her love, and how much these things mean to people. She's an angel. I'll call her that. She does not merely bring the gospel. Listen carefully to me now, she does not really bring the Gospel, she is the gospel. She is the good message because of who she is, what she is and, as much as anything else, how she treats people.

Hebrews 13 at the end of the chapter, this is where the book of Hebrews begins to become personal. You kind of get the feeling up until this point is a theological treatise, and you forget the fact that this is a letter to real people, in real time, from a real person. He says in chapter thirteen verse one, "Let brotherly love continue. Don't be forgetful to be hospitable because thereby some have entertained angels unaware. Remember those who are in prison as if you were in prison with them, and them which suffer adversity as being yourselves also in the body", and I don't know if you know anybody who's in prison or not, but you know those guys, and ladies, who are out there in a prison, somewhere for some stupid thing they've done in their life, a crime that they committed, in rare cases maybe a crime they didn't commit, I don't know why they're there.

Do you have any idea how much a letter means to them? A personal letter telling about circumstances, and people they know, and just taking the time to answer their letters means to them? If you don't know, you don't have occasion, you probably may never get it, but if you ever do, you will begin to realize by the letters you get back, how important it is that they hear a letter from you. And of course some people who are in nursing homes feel like they're in jail. And your presence there, your visits, your time with them is a kind of evangelism. Now, naturally, the words of the gospel will come into play at some point, but the words of the gospel are the easy part. The hard part is being the gospel.

One of the great things to know about evangelism is that it depends heavily on being in the right place at the right time. It's it happens sometimes too in the strangest way, ways that you wouldn't necessarily see.

In Acts 16:6 Luke is writing an account of all Paul's journeys through Asia Minor, when Paul and Silas had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. I don't know how that happened, it could have been a surly border guard, who knows what it was, but Luke says they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit, so they came into Mysia, and then Bithynia, and the spirit didn't let them go there. So two separate doors were slammed in their face, and funneled them right now on to Troas. They attributed that to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. How'd they know? I think they knew because they were looking for it. So, they got down to Troas, probably said, "What on earth are we doing here?" It was a seacoast town, might have gotten ahead. A vision appeared to Paul in the night. There was a man of Macedonia who stood there, and prayed him saying, "Come over into Macedonia and help us". Thus began an entirely new phase of Paul's ministry.

I'm not telling you yet the important part of this. An interesting concept begins to arise here. From the Cold War, and the war on terror, we've got a new idea that's entered our vocabulary, it came in with the between us and the Russians at one time. It's the concept of a 'sleeper cell'. You've heard that in the news somewhere? These are people deliberately planted in a certain area, sometimes they were given a code word, that if they got it over the phone, or through the mail, they would know they were activated and they were supposed to do 'X'. They were there for one purpose really, and one purpose only, and they were

supposed to live normal lives when in a society. Nobody knew for nothing who they were, until such time as they were pressed into service for whatever it was to do. We were told that Soviets had 'sleeper cells' in this country by their hundreds, perhaps thousands, who had instructions on what to do in the event we got into war with the Soviet Union. Now, there are Islamic terrorists who are like 'sleeper cells'.

Well Paul, when he got to Macedonia, encountered an entirely different kind of sleeper cell. In Acts 16:10, "After he had seen the vision of that man we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. Therefore loosing from Troas, we came with a straight course to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis; And from thence to Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony: and we were in that town abiding certain days. And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither".

I think this is precious. I mean, if you want a place, they would just have a place where they'd go for prayer if there was no synagogue, and there was none in Philippi.

And who was there? Jewish men? Rabbis? No. A group of women who met there. "And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira", a business woman. Purple is a particular type of dye, a very valuable dye, and she was a merchant from Thyatira. What's she doing in Philippi? She was a 'sleeper cell', and she didn't know it. She had no idea why she was there, she just was there. "Whose heart this woman the Lord opened that she attended to the things that were spoken by Paul, and when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us saying, if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and live there, and she constrained us."

For all we know, this woman was brought from Thyatira to be the first building blocks of the church at Philippi. And it was a precious church that rose up around those women. It was a church that, when Paul was in Corinth, they help him time after time. It was a poor church, they did not have much in the resources, but whatever Paul needed they broke their backs to provide for him. It was led by this woman.

Often, the work of the Holy Spirit is so subtle it looks for all the world like chance. Bad luck. You know, a surly border guard. It looks for all the world like all kinds of things, and you never know until afterward you stop, and you slap your head, and say, "Of course, the Holy Spirit closed that door, but this one was still open, and I could go there." More and more I realize, you know, that it is rarely that the Holy Spirit looks like anything but 'time and chance'. And I'm coming to see, the Feast of Tabernacles as a gathering of all God's angels who are 'sleeper cells' at home.

Sleeper cells in Chattanooga. Sleeper cell in Nashville. Another sleeper cell in Memphis. Another sleeper cell in Little Rock. They're out there in the community, sometimes having no idea why they are where they are, or what they're supposed to do in the long run.

Why do we come to the feast? Why is it important for us to be here? Well, we come so we can encourage one another. So we can help one another. So we can teach one another. And we have tried, right from the very beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles, and in CEM, in our feast, to make these as much learning opportunities, growing opportunities, training, teaching and developing. We used to have a banner we put on the wall up here – “That the man of God may be proficient, and equipped to every good work”. And my thanks to those who really who year after year now, Nancy Vandermark and Pam Dewey, for a long time now, have alternated year by year managing our seminar schedule. And it's an important addition to the feast because it's a part of our working together, and teaching one another, and also the feast helps keep us all dedicated to the task. Keep us mindful of the task. Help us to stay focused on what is really important and what we're supposed to do. We are probably heading into hard times. We are going to be needing one another in ways that we have not needed each other perhaps for a long time.

We're going to need to have our ‘wicks trimmed’ for our lamps. We're going to need to have our savor as salt renewed, so that we can do what we're here for. As one person ‘sleeper cells’ waiting for the call, waiting for the message, the open door and the chance to make a difference. That's who we are, why we're here.

For Paul, and the Philippians, communication was not easy. Took a letter, he had to write it, no word processors, you know, strike out words, you had to scribble thing out, and then somebody had to put it in his hand, take it put it in a pack, and take off on foot from wherever Paul was to deliver that letter in Philippi, a long time out there. Sometimes it was verbal, sometimes it was written. For us it's a lot easier, and thus it's taken for granted, like so much. And we must not miss what God has laid before us. The scripture that has become very important to me is Malachi 3:16, “Then they that fear the Lord spoke often to one another, and the Lord listened”. You and I are sitting here talking to each other, and God listens to what it is that we say. We fire e-mails back and forth. Every one of those goes through God's internet server, he knows about them, when we write them, when they get where they're going. “The LORD heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them as a man spares his own son that serves him. Then you shall return, and judge between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serves God. And him that does not.”

You know this is not a job that you can afford to leave anyone else, this job of staying in touch, this job of communication. Because what he says here is always that fear God will be in contact with each other on a continual basis. Why? We need each other. We needed encouragement. We need a pat on the back. We need somebody to say, “I know exactly how you feel because I have been there.” The sermon that Lenny Cacchio gave us ["Coping Strategies"] was so effective in that regard, it meant so much to people because he'd been there, and they couldn't say that he didn't understand where they were. Time after time, and

this is something you need to remember, that the ways that you hurt, the things that you fear, the struggles that you go through are not wasted. I learned this very early in my ministry I didn't understand some of the things that were happening to me. I went through some real traumatic experiences, and what was interesting, the first time it happened, I prayed and prayed and prayed, and finally overcame the problem, and went on. And at the time, or at from the time I overcame it, it wasn't two weeks until I was sitting in someone else's home on a regular routine visit, and a lady brought up precisely the same issue. And I was able to talk to her in a way, and with it with an intelligence, and an understanding, and with a help, that I could never have done if I had not fought that battle myself.

So, I have no idea why God has put you where you are, but it's for a reason. It's not a job you should leave to someone else. No church, no organization, not CEM, not anybody else can take care of keeping you in touch with other saints. You have to do it yourself. No one else can do the task that is given to you as a 'sleeper cell' in the Kingdom of God either.

No one else but Lydia was there to provide logistics for Paul when he based himself in northern Greece. If she doesn't do the job, the job doesn't get done. No one else but her was there.

Now, I have no idea, why God has put you there and not here. Why you're on this road and not that road. I have no idea what he's doing. I have no idea who may be coming down that road that you're stationed on, but it's important that you be there. And it's important that you keep your candle where you can find it when the lights go out - and you keep your matches dry.

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