

## YELP

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Matthew 5:21-26

You may have noticed that over the past couple of months our church has increased its social media presence. Back in the Fall, we made changes to our Facebook page, and last month we launched a new website. Does a church really need a Facebook page? Somehow, we have managed to survive two-thousand years without funny cat videos and pictures of what my aunt cooked for dinner.

But there is a reason that we're doing these things. First of all, there is the obvious need to share information among the congregation: When is the next youth outing? What's the menu for Wednesday? How do you spell the preacher's first name? The Internet provides a fast, easy, convenient way to share this information.

But there is another, more compelling reason to expand our social media footprint. Last Sunday, we looked at the scripture passage in which Jesus tells the parable about the lamp. *No one*, he says, *lights a lamp and then covers it with a basket. When you light a lamp, you place it high on a lamp stand so that it will illuminate the house.* This lamp are those who follow Jesus. *You are light*, he tells them. The followers of Jesus are light and the light they radiate is nothing less than the reflected glory of God. They are supposed to shine.

There are many ways to reflect God's glory. One way is through our personal relationships—how we treat people is a reflection of our relationship God. If you treat people poorly then your relationship with God is probably not that strong. If you treat people with love and compassion, the world can see that you walk in God's path.

Another way to be light and reflect God's glory is to allow the world to witness who we are as a church. It is for this reason that we have a sign out on Main Street that identifies this building as the home of First Presbyterian Church. A church is not meant to be a secret organization. It is not meant to be hidden under a basket. We also want the world to know who we are and how to find us because that is what Jesus instructs us to do. Be a lamp on a lamp stand; be a city on hill.

Churches can shine their lights in many ways. Between here in my home, I pass at least two billboards where churches have purchased ad space. It must work for them. In earlier years, we purchased ads in the Yellow Pages. We made sure we were listed in the church directory section of the local newspaper.

But then Al Gore invented the internet and things changed. Now our light can shine anywhere.

If a person recently has relocated to Wilson County and is searching for a church home, with the internet they can look at our web site and virtually check us out. Or, if someone in, say, Ohio is even considering moving to Wilson County, they may wonder, is there a Presbyterian Church there? What is it like? Google will lead them to our web page and they can check us out.

And then there is Facebook where Michael has done an outstanding job of posting regular updates. Facebook is different from our website because it is a network. Michael has doubled the number of people who “like” us and “follow” us. And that is important not because we want to be popular but because each of these “likes” connects us to more people and more networks. And our light shines brighter.

And then a couple of weeks back, Michael suggested to me that we should be on Yelp. And I responded, “No way.” Yelp is a site where people post reviews on businesses and services. I use it when I'm out of town and trying to pick a restaurant. On Yelp you can review car mechanics, dry cleaners, Taco stands, roofers, and more. But the danger of reviews like this is that anyone can post them. Good reviews are great, but bad ones can be devastating. There have been many instances where a business has sued to force someone to rescind their bad review. So, to me, as pastor, Yelp is terrifying.

Michael, however, persisted and made a strong case for this being another way to brighten our light. So, I promised to keep an open mind if he would give me time to survey some reviews of other churches. And I did. And that was fascinating. And I want to share with you some of what I discovered.

Most reviews of churches are positive. People say good things about where they worship. Here are some five-star reviews.

Pastor is truly a man of God. Cares about his church and helps the community.

We are elated to have a church family as friendly, welcoming, caring and enriching as we find here.

What terrific people and a great facility. Never felt more welcome. The sanctuary is beautifully lined with stained glass.

This place will heal your soul and your spirit if you are broken. **There is not a higher compliment.**

Five-star reviews are to be treasured, but then at the other end you find the one-star reviews. And they usually reveal more about the reviewer than the church.

If you just want a laugh, [this] Church is the place. If you want to hear the Gospel, go elsewhere. Ooh. That stings.

The [building] itself is beautiful but we went to the most horrible wedding here. **That has nothing to do with the church!**

[This] church is super awesome and cool! I love this church but not as much as West Haven!

**And sometimes the one-star review lands on the pastor.**

I don't recommend. Pastor's wife is very sweet, but the pastor is arrogant and won't discuss anything that he falls short on. Folds his arms and sulls up.

The next-to-last one is my favorite. It gives you a clear sense of the reviewer's priorities. I love this church! Clean bathrooms and auditorium! The pastor is great! I would like to be reviewed as a great pastor, but I also want to be listed ahead of the toilet.

And lastly, there is the church review that you don't ever want to read: Nobody talked to me.

The truth about Yelp is that words have consequence. Our words have power—the power to build up, the power to tear down. What we say to other people and about other people is a reflection of our relationship with God. And Jesus addresses this in our reading for today.

Today's reading is part of the great Sermon on the Mount which we find in the Gospel of Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount starts off with the Beatitudes—those statements where Jesus assigns blessing to the wretched or despised of the world. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and so on.*

After describing who is blessed, Jesus then tells the crowd of listeners that they must be *light* and illuminate the world with God's glory. Then, in today's reading, Jesus offers specific teachings on how his followers may fully reflect God's light.

In Jesus' day, and today, there are certain rules or laws that we know we must follow if we wish to lead Godly lives. For Jews and Christians, our scripture provides the Commandments as the basic parameter for living with God: *do not murder, not steal, do not lie, worship God and God alone.* Jesus augments these commandments with his own injunctions to *love your neighbor* and *treat others as you would have them treat you.* These commands establish the baseline of how we should live at Christians.

Even the most well-intentioned among us has the tendency to follow the letter of the law and proclaim that to be adequate. We consider that following the law is "good enough." But the laws of God are meant to be instructive; they are meant to guide us in how we might best live life abundantly.

Jesus begins our reading for today saying, *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'* The first statement, *you shall not murder*, is one of the Ten Commandments. The second is a summary from the book of Deuteronomy. Both statements are clear prohibitions against murdering a human being.

Those hearing Jesus saying this would no doubt nod their heads and think to themselves, "Yes, I've heard this before, and, yes, I have obeyed this law. I have not murdered anyone. I am good."

Jesus, however, argues that if anyone harbors anger with another person, they will be as liable to judgment as if they had murdered them. Likewise, insulting someone else or calling them *raka* is just as much a form of murder as murder itself. *Raka* is translated as *fool*, but it was much more serious indictment. As we might say, it's a fighting word.

What Jesus is teaching the crowd is that simply not murdering someone is only the bare minimum of God's law. Killing comes in many forms. In God's eyes, it is as bad to kill someone as it is to kill a relationship. In God's eyes, saying "you are dead to me," is murder. Why? Because God desires that we live in relationship. If our relationships with others are broken, then our relationship with God is incomplete.

Jesus offers this scenario. He says when you come to the synagogue with a gift for God, and on the way you remember that someone you know holds a grudge against you, then what you should do is to leave the gift and first go make up with the other person. Then you may return and offer your gift to God with a clear heart.

A gift offered in love is far more valuable than a gift shrouded in anger.

Murder carries the consequence of judgement. But so does the killing of a relationship. We can murder with our words and insults.

Jesus' lesson to his followers is to challenge them to embrace God's law in a new way that fully reflects God's glory. Jesus' purpose is not to replace the law, but to unleash its transformative power, to lead God's people from saying, "I have not murdered" to announcing, "I've brought reconciliation to each damaged relationship." Where there was anger, there is now forgiveness. Where there was insult, there is now peace. Where a relationship was dead, there is resurrection.

When we can do this, we will discover God's kingdom.

As followers of Christ, I would urge you to consider the commandments of God and Jesus and ponder the ways that they may guide you toward the kingdom.

Lastly, after surveying the uneven landscape of online reviews, I decided that maybe it was worth the risk. So, we signed up with Yelp. If you go to Yelp and

search “churches in Lebanon, Tennessee,” FPC shows up near the top of the list. If you feel moved to leave a review, I would encourage you to do so. That may help our church’s light shine brighter. Also, if you are compelled to make mention of the excellent preaching at FPC, I certainly won’t stop you. Just mention me ahead of the toilets.