

Matthew 5:13-16 – How Are You Using Your Influence?

I appreciate the cartoon strip “Peanuts” created by the late Charles Shultz.

I remember one strip that featured Peppermint Patty and Charlie Brown having a conversation. You may recall that Peppermint Patty was one of the characters in the Peanuts family who always seemed to treat Charlie Brown (or Chuck as she called him) well.

This particular strip showed the two walking home from school. PP says to Charlie Brown, “Guess what Chuck? The 1st day of school, and I got sent to the principal’s office. And it was your fault Chuck.”

In the next strip Charlie Brown looking bewildered by the statement responds, “My fault? How could it be my fault that you were sent to the principal’s office?”

In the last frame Peppermint Patty says, “You’re my friend aren’t you Chuck?” Charlie Brown says “Of course I’m your friend Peppermint Patty.” She then says “Then you should have been a better influence on me.”

That gives new meaning to “passing the buck” doesn’t it?

But the central truth of that strip is hard to miss. We do influence people for good and bad don’t we?

How many of you parents told your children to watch their attitudes and behaviors because they had younger siblings that were watching? How many of you remember your parents telling you that?

Well nothing changes when you become a born-again Christian.

People are still watching you. If anything the watching is intensified isn't it?

A few years ago Huey Lewis had a hit song called "Jacob's Ladder." You might not remember the song by the title but you might by the lyrics. (No you can relax; I'm not going to sing it) In this song though, Lewis sang about being pursued by an obese man selling salvation (clearly a reference to the blight of scandalous televangelists).

The chorus line sang over and over again said in part, "I'm not in a hurry to think about such things, and I don't want to be like you." OUCH!

People are watching you. That begs the question – Have you ever considered what they see?

There's no shortage of people in the world who are not afraid to say "If that's what Christianity is about, you can keep it because I don't want to be like you."

Joe Aldrich, author of the book "Life-Style Evangelism" said: "Christians should be the good news before they share the good news."

I like that because it says that we should understand that how we live our lives has a direct impact upon the effectiveness of our witness.

The Barna Research Group recently released the results of a study involving 10,000 Christians. Three of the questions posed to this group of people were these:

- What were the circumstances surrounding your salvation?
- How were you saved?
- Who or what started you going to church?

The results according to the Barna Research Group were as follows:

½ of 1%	as a result of attending a revival service
2%	went to church initially because they had a special need
3%	were attracted to the church's programs
5%	liked the Sunday School
6%	liked the pastor (I think that # is low)
79%	came to Christ because of the witness of a friend

Now that's influence in action! Did you know that having this kind of influence, making this type of impact on our friends and the culture at large is exactly what Jesus taught?

Let's see how God's Word makes this point this morning.

5:13-16

The full impact of these words is lost on us today because we don't appreciate the value of salt in past generations.

In ancient societies, salt was a valuable commodity. For example at the height of the Roman Empire, its soldiers received their pay in salt.

In fact, did you know that our English word "salary" comes from the Latin word "salarium" which referred to these payments of salt made to Roman soldiers?

It's from this practice that we developed our saying "he's not worth his salt" to describe someone that we think is lazy and not worth their wages.

So, the multitudes listening to Jesus that day would have clearly understood that He was talking about something very important when he likened them to salt.

I've heard a lot of theories over the years concerning the exact meaning that Jesus had in mind by using the symbol of salt. Some have said for instance that:

- Since salt is white it represents purity; Christians are to be pure; in fact Jesus has just told them this very thing.
- Since salt adds flavor, Christians are to add flavor to the world; we are to live a life of joy and excitement that draws people to investigate the source of our joy.
- Others have said that since salt stings in a wound, Christians are to be an irritant to ungodly behavior (some Christians have made being an irritant an art form).
- Some have suggested that since salt creates thirst, Christians should create a thirst for God in those who don't know Him.

I don't disagree with any of those points. But I believe there is something else meant here. I believe the primary idea that Jesus was communicating here was that Christians, like salt, are to be a preserving influence on society.

The primary usage of salt in Jesus' day and even into the early 20th century was as a preservative.

Salt was used to prevent food from spoiling. So what Jesus was saying to us is that Christians are to be a preserving influence on the world. We are to influence our surroundings morally in the same way that salt prevents decay in food.

This is a consistent message we see in the Scriptures. In the book of Colossians we read these words:

“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders (unbelievers), making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you are to respond to each person” (4:5-6).

I'm reminded of Jesus' words to the church of Laodicea found in Revelation:

“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (3:15-16).

The point is this – Christians who have a shallow faith, Christians who are half-hearted and inconsistent have lost their saltiness and Jesus says have lost their purpose and effectiveness.

In our passage this morning Jesus uses two illustrations – salt and light. Notice the contrast and the similarity between the two.

Here’s the contrast – salt is most often unseen until tasted. Light on the other hand is a very visible and revealing influence. The similarity takes some looking. It is found in the pronoun “you” in v13 and v 14. In these statements “you” is emphatic. Thus it is appropriate to read these verses as “You are the only salt of the earth; You are the only light of the world.

The corruption and evil in the world will not be addressed unless God’s children are its salt and light. Our lives are to manifest what the world does not have but needs desperately- Jesus.

We are to reflect all that Jesus is and has done in our lives and we are to do it visibly so people will see and praise God. That can be a challenge folks.

Again, people are looking at you and me as the best and maybe only example of what Christianity is. (We can’t be like pro athletes who say I’m not a role model because we are a role model for the lost)

What are people watching for? I used to think that most unbelievers were watching to see me fall. Some no doubt do but I’ve become convinced that most unbelievers are really

watching me to see if Christianity “works.”

The plain truth is this folks – we are either telling people by our lives that we have a dynamic relationship with God through Jesus Christ or that Christianity is just another religion that has nothing to offer them.

Consider the story of this wealthy Christian woman living in Nairobi, Kenya who hired a young Kenyan as a house servant. After 3 months of service the young man asked for a letter of reference to a Muslim family a few miles away.

The Christian woman offered to raise her servant’s pay but the young man said he wasn’t leaving because of money. He then told her this:

“A few months ago I decided that I would either become a Christian or a Muslim. I came to work for you to discover how Christians act. Now I will go to live with a Muslim family to see how Muslims act.”

The Christian woman had mostly regrets as she recalled instantly all the times she did not act like a Christian toward this young man.

What’s the answer to this dilemma? How do we face this challenge to be salt and light to our families, friends, and co-workers?

How can we avoid being “trampled under foot” or having our light “put under the peck measure?” Jesus is telling us that the attitudes and actions of His followers either draw people toward a relationship with God or push them away.

We’ve all seen Christians who we wish would not say they’re a Christian. It would be much better if they would just shut up. Christians who contribute more to pushing people away than drawing them closer to God are not being light and salt.

There’s the “in your face believer.” They’re the ones who

would pull up next to a car of total strangers and yell, “Hey, do you know that if you don’t get saved you’re going to hell?”

Then we have the “holier than thou” believers. Their words and actions make it clear that you’ll never reach their lofty spiritual heights.

There are some believers that are cosmetic Christians (I’m not talking about ladies in pink Cadillacs). Their faith is really nothing more than a thin veneer – skin deep – because it does not change their character, personality, or values.

So that’s how not to be. How do we make sure we are drawing people? How do we fulfill Christ’s commands to be salt and light?

I think the first thing we need to be is consistent. Our family, friends, and co-workers need to see us living what we say we believe.

Here’s a story that illustrates my point.

A business owner developed a habit of hiring Christians over a period of years. What caused him to do this was the result of a situation he had experienced with a Christian employee.

The business owner said “I was naturally drawn to God by observing Christian workers who were conscientious and kind and thorough on the job. But what really impressed me the most was the day one Christian whom I knew to be a brand new convert to Christ asked if he could speak to me after work. I agreed but then for the rest of the day I grew increasingly concerned that this young zealot would try to convert me too.

I was surprised when he came into my office with his head hung low and said to me, ‘Sir, I’ll only take a few minutes, but I’m here to ask your forgiveness. Over the years I’ve worked for you I’ve done what a lot of other employees do, like borrowing a few company products here and there. And I’ve

taken some extra supplies; I've abused telephone privileges; and I've cheated the time clock now and then.

But I became a Christian a few months ago and it's real – not the smoke and mirrors stuff. In gratitude for what Christ has done for me and in obedience to Him, I want to make amends to you and the company for the wrongs I've done. So could we figure out a way to do that? If you have to fire me for what I've done I'll understand. I deserve it. Or if you want to dock my pay. Dock it whatever figure you think is appropriate. If you want to give me extra work to do on my own time, that would be ok too. I just want to make things right with God and between us.”

The business owner said it was this conversation more than anything else that encouraged him to take seriously the claims of Christ.

Did you notice that it wasn't a clever presentation of the gospel; it wasn't a well-rehearsed testimony. It was a simple confession and willingness to make things right – to be a Christian who lives consistently with the things Christ taught.

To be salt and light also means that we will be compassionate Christians. Compassion is not just an inward emotional attitude. Biblical compassion is action oriented.

James illustrates this:



“What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and

one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (2:14-17).

I think its clear that “engagement” with the culture is the key to being salt and light. Jesus is telling us we can make a difference. In fact He has called us to make a difference.

Let me warn you though. The world will throw up roadblocks to try and stop you from being salt and light.

How do they do that? How many of you have heard someone say “Faith is a private matter.”? This is one of those things that people just accept because it’s been said so often.

People say this all the time- “You shouldn’t talk about sex, politics, or religion in public.” You know what I see today? That list is down to one – religion. People hope to silence Christians by insisting that faith is a private matter. Is that what Jesus taught?

Jesus told His followers to go into the world and preach the good news to all creation.” He said “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea, and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The world will try and stop you from being salt and light by

insisting that compromise is good. Here's a curious fact for you brothers and sisters – religion is on the rise in America today but morality is at an all time low and getting worse.

How can that be? I believe it's because the salt has lost its flavor and the light has been hidden. In current terms this means that the ethics and morals of a vast number of Christians are no different from their unbelieving neighbors.

What is a Christian? We've been studying the answer to that question for a couple of weeks now. Jesus has much to say on the subject.

Consider this illustration as a glimpse of the answer.

A young boy of 9 years old went to Europe with his parents one summer. Part of their trip was spent visiting the old gothic cathedrals scattered across the continent.

The boy was mesmerized by the vastness of the ancient cathedrals. He stared in awe at the magnificent stained glass windows. He wondered at the portraits of the disciples. When he got back to America he was asked by his Sunday School teacher what he liked most about the old churches.

The boy replied "the great stained glass windows picturing the saints." His SS teacher asked him if he knew what a saint was. Without hesitating the boy said "A saint is a person the light shines through."

What a profound yet simple truth. A Christian is someone whom the light of Christ shines through. Is it shining through you?

Our being salt and light is for the express purpose of influencing people for Christ. That's what v16 is telling us.

The word for "good" this verse uses to describe our works that the world sees is not used to emphasize quality here as much as it is used to emphasize beauty and attractiveness.

The thought is that when we give feet to our faith, when we demonstrate the character of Christ, when we shine that way, then people will take notice of the beautiful work that God has done in our lives and they will be attracted to Him through us.

Isn't that a humbling thought? I'm reminded of Ephesians 2:10 which says:

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

I found a poem this week that speaks directly to this passage of Scripture. It is entitled:

The Gospel According to You

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
Are read by more than a few
But the one that is most read and commented on
Is the gospel according to you.
You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day
By the things that you do and the words that you say,
Men read what you write, whether faithless or true,
Say, what is the gospel according to you?
Do men read His truth and His love in your life,
Or has yours been too full of malice and strife?
Does your life speak of evil, or does it ring true?
Say, what is the gospel according to you?

Arthur McPhee

**This is from my Matthew series taught at Calvary Chapel of Lima from 2006-2008. I am currently teaching through Matthew again. This will be the 2015-2016 series and will be available in audio format soon. Look for those teachings on my teaching ministry site – [The Transforming Word](#).*

The Sermon on the Mount picture from Vinelife UK.

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