

Text: Matthew 5:13-16 (Pew Bible, pg.958)

Title: “Engage ... To Make an Impact”

INTRODUCTION

VIDEO – “We are the Church”

Let’s open our Bibles to Matthew 5:13. We’re listening as our Lord Jesus issues an urgent call to on-mission living ... to engage our city and our world with His love. As you’re turning I just want to remind you to stop by and pick up your free copy of the book *I Am a Church Member*. We’re reading it together just so we can get on the same page in understanding what it means to be a member of church that takes seriously the mission Jesus has given to us to engage ... to live an on-mission life. Now Jesus uses two very simple, yet powerful, images to drive home this truth. Read Matthew 5:13-16.

(11:00) ILLUSTRATION – Back in the 1980s a young man named Steve Reynolds was a staffer with the Christian relief organization, World Vision, working in the horrific famine conditions in Ethiopia. In the relief camps he witnessed the horrors of starvation and death, so he decided to gather information hoping he might help people to notice and to do something about it. One day Steve Reynolds got a call from World Vision headquarters asking if he would host a young European couple, Ali and Paul Hewson, who wanted to visit Ethiopia and see firsthand what was happening. Steve agreed, and Ali and Paul stayed almost a month. They worked alongside Steve in showing compassion to the suffering people. Paul was a gifted musician, so he wrote little songs that the children enjoyed singing. When Paul and Ali left to return home they were so moved that they had committed to do whatever they could to help. Paul was the lead singer in a rock band, and so everywhere he went he was an advocate for the poorest of the poor. Ultimately he became tremendously famous, which opened doors to kings and queens and presidents, and other world leaders. From that position of influence he convinced nations to give billions of dollars in aid to the poor. You may know Paul Hewson better by his nickname, Bono, the lead singer in the Irish rock band U2.

In an interview years later Bono said that what made the difference in his passion to help the poor was the impact of a young Christian relief worker named Steve Reynolds.

Notice that these verses explain for us...

1. WHO WE ARE

Matthew 5:13a - You are the salt of the earth.

Matthew 5:14a - You are the light of the world.

This teaching of Jesus can be summed up in a word ... impact. Or we might say ... influence. It seems to be a universal longing in the human spirit to make a difference ... to make an impact or an influence ... to know that our life has counted for something.

(8:30) ILLUSTRATION – About this time every year people make a big deal about the death of Elvis Presley that happened in August, 1977 ... 36 years ago. At least I think he died. In connection with that I read in one article that in spite of Elvis’ enormous success, he was a very unhappy, unfulfilled man. The article quoted his wife Priscilla as saying, “Elvis never came to terms with who he was meant to be or what his purpose in life was. He thought he was here for a reason, maybe to preach, maybe to serve, maybe to save, maybe to care for people and that agonizing desire was always with him and he knew he wasn't fulfilling it. So he would go on stage and he wouldn't have to think about it.” And Elvis is like so many people, they just don't know who they are.

When you come to know Christ, you know who you are. You have a purpose for living. Jesus explains for us in clear terms who we are as His followers. Both salt and light impact everything they touch. Salt is not neutral. Light is not neutral. They both make an impact. And that is who we are as followers of Jesus Christ.

Notice that Jesus said, “You *are* the salt ... You *are* the light.” That’s our identity as followers of Jesus. In fact, more accurately it is: “You, and you only, are the salt ... you, and you only are the light.” Jesus is saying, “I have no other salt; I have no other light. Tag, you’re it!” And the “you” is probably better translated “y’all.” (I know, that’s Texas slang, but it’s what Jesus meant.) The “you” is plural, meaning that this is not just *your* individual identity as a Christ-follower; it is *our* corporate identity as the church.

And notice that Jesus said, “You are the salt *of the earth* ... the light *of the world*.” Jesus means for His followers to engage the world in which they live. Many believers today have retreated into a safe “Church-ianity” where the extent of their Christian life is just “going to church.” Obviously we don’t forsake our gathering together, but the reason we gather is ...

Hebrews 10:24 - And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

The way God intends to impact and influence the world is through His church. He has no other plan. That’s our identity; that’s who we are. In His prayer recorded in John 17 Jesus prayed for us:

John 17:14 - I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.

John 17:18 - As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

So we are *in* the world, but we are not *of* the world ... we don’t belong to the world. We’re not of the world so we live by different standards in the world to make an impact for our Savior. And because we are not “of the world” we can expect that we will be hated by some. So it will not be easy to live out who we are ... but we must do it.

But our Lord also explains...

2. WHAT WE DO

Matthew 5:13a - You are the salt of the earth.

Jesus doesn't tell us exactly what He means when He says to be the "salt of the earth." Historians tell us that salt was an important and valuable part of their everyday life, and it was used for a number of different purposes. Soldiers were sometimes paid with salt. If he wasn't a good soldier it might be said that he wasn't "worth his salt." Have you heard that expression? Salt was exchanged as a sign of friendship, and even a seal of a covenant. Sometimes salt was used as an antiseptic to kill germs in a wound. And more familiar to us today, salt was used as a seasoning that added flavor to food.

But the main thing that Jesus probably had in mind was the value of salt in preserving food, particularly meat. They didn't have refrigerators or freezers, so the way meat was preserved was to cover it in salt. Salt penetrates the meat and impacts the meat by delaying the process of decay.

There's moral and spiritual decay in our world and Jesus means to stop the decay with the salt of believers' lives. In just about every way you can imagine, the morality in our land is decaying. And Jesus shakes us out of the salt shaker into our worlds to live such holy and loving lives that we delay the decay. Will we live as a preserving influence in our culture or will we let it continue to deteriorate?

But if salt stays in the salt shaker, if it doesn't make contact with the meat, it can't do its work. To have an *impact* the salt must make *contact*. And if the church stays huddled together all the time, if we don't see our mission to be salt in our world, we will not be faithful to Jesus.

There's decay in our world, and Jesus means to stop the decay with the salt of believers. And there's darkness in the world, and Jesus means to confront the darkness with the light of believers.

Matthew 5:14a - You are the light of the world.

Salt penetrates to preserve, and light penetrates to illuminate. And this is what God did in sending His Son Jesus into the world. The Bible says of Jesus...

John 1:4 - In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

But there's a power in the darkness in the human heart that naturally resists and fights against the light of Jesus Christ.

John 1:5 - The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

So this is what Jesus means when He says...

John 8:12 - "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Light shows people the way. And we do that with our life ... with our “good deeds” (v.16). But there’s more to it than being a good example. Jesus came as light into this world. He showed the light through His walk, but also through His talk. And we must do the same.

EXAMPLES:

- So we will be the first one to show up on the doorstep of a grieving co-worker with food for their family.
- We will be the first to stop by the hospital when they have a new baby.
- We will be the first ones to encourage when someone is down.
- We will be the first one to stop the gossip that bites at the reputation of others.
- We will go the extra mile. We will do the unexpected. We’ll be the hardest workers and most diligent students.
- We’ll be the ones concerned about hunger and homelessness and sex trafficking.

Our work places can be different because we work there. Our schools can be different because we go to school there. Our neighborhoods can be different because we live there. Our city can be different because we are engaged there.

They may call us haters, but we’ll show them the difference as we serve the hurting of every kind, and tell them about the One who heals the hurts of the human heart. They may call us narrow-minded, but we’ll show them the wide love of Jesus with our unconditional love and in proclaiming the Good News that God loved the world.

That’s what Jesus had in mind when He talks about what we do. But Jesus also explains...

3. WHAT WE DON’T DO

First, we don’t let our salt loose its saltiness.

Matthew 5:13b - “If the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

Now technically speaking salt cannot stop being salt; but it can be polluted. In ancient times sometimes salt was contaminated with different kinds of minerals that gave it such a bad taste to the salt that you wouldn’t want to use it. If you happened to end up with a bag of this salt in your house, it’s not good for anything. About all you could do with it was to throw it out into the path or the road in front of your house where it would be ground into the dirt and disappear. It’s worthless. As Jesus said, “It is no longer good for anything...”

What a sad indictment on a believer or on a church ... no longer good for anything except to be thrown out. Salt has to stay salty. Many believers and churches have lost their saltiness. They’re living such ungodly and compromised lives that there’s nothing different about the way they live or the way they talk. If we lose our saltiness, we may make *contact*, but we don’t make an *impact*, because our lives are not godly.

Jesus said we must not lose our saltiness, and, second, we must not hide our light.

Matthew 5:14b - A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

In the homeland of Jesus villages and towns would often be built on top or the side of a hill. The limestone buildings would glisten in the Middle Eastern sun. At night, the glow of candles inside the houses could be seen for miles around.

Matthew 5:15 - Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

So it would be ridiculous in the evening for a woman to light a candle, then immediately take a basket or a bowl and cover the light. No, it's not put under a basket; it is put up on a stand so the light can spread as far as possible.

Don't hide the light. Don't be ashamed of Jesus. Don't be ashamed to live for Jesus and to speak for Jesus wherever you are. A hidden light is a useless light. A hidden witness is a useless witness ... no longer good for anything.

ILLUSTRATION: Deitrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who took the teachings of Jesus seriously when he resisted the Nazi takeover of Germany. He challenged the church not to lose its saltiness and to not stop shining its light. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* he said: "Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him." And that's the challenge for our church in these days as we ENGAGE our city and our world with the love of Jesus Christ.

Maybe we look at this mission and think it just can't be done in the US today. There was a time back in the 1950s when the Christian faith owned the US. The influence of Christians was felt in just about every arena you can imagine ... politics, courts, legislation, and entertainment. But that was 60 years ago. Today we may feel marginalized. We may be a little pessimistic about the possibilities of making much of a difference in our nation that seems like it is being sucked into a black hole morally and spiritually.

And maybe we have lost our "home field advantage." But when Jesus first spoke these words to His followers they were not in the majority ... they were an oppressed minority. Even though they lived in a religious land, the followers of Jesus Christ were considered insignificant. After Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection everywhere believers went, just about everywhere the church lived out its mission, they were met with resistance and hate. And it would continue to be so for the next 200 years. But in spite of that they were faithful, and they made an impact.

You are salt. Is your salt good for something or good for nothing? You are light. Is your light shining, or is it covered up? Is it good for something or good for nothing?

Now most importantly Jesus explains...

4. WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

Matthew 5:16 - In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

It's true that many of the great things that have been accomplished by people who have made an impact on our world were done with mixed motives ... sometimes totally selfish motives. But Jesus calls us to a life and saves us for a life that is for the highest purpose ... for the glory of God alone.

Notice that the good deeds are "seen." We're talking here about being so engaged with others that they see what's really different about us ... they see our good deeds, our righteous deeds, our loving deeds.

And as a result they glorify our Father in heaven. We're not doing to show off anyone but Jesus. We won't have to advertise what we're doing; people will see it and God will be glorified if we do in the right way and with the right motivation.

Note: It will not be enough for us to simply live a good life and think that our good example will be enough. How will they know to glorify God for our lives if we don't help them connect the dots ... if we don't share the Gospel and explain how Christ makes the difference in our lives.

Jesus is saying, "Live for God's glory in the place where I have placed you." Peter was in the crowd that day when Jesus taught these things. Years later Peter wrote in...

1 Peter 2:12 - Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

ILLUSTRATION – Just two or three generations after the deaths of the first disciples of Jesus, a North African theologian named Tertullian told how the pagans watched those early Christians be salt and light in their culture. Tertullian reported that the pagans marveled: "See how these Christians love one another." Those non-believers watched as these early Christians cared for the poor, the widows and the orphans ... how they visited prisoners and those condemned to a living death working in the mines ... how they showed compassion for victims of famine, earthquakes and wars. One unusual thing, however, really grabbed the attention of nonbelievers. These early Christians provided a burial service for the poor who could not afford regular burials or tombs. In those days the Roman emperor Julian wanted to completely snuff out Christianity, but he couldn't deny the love that was practiced by those early believers. Emperor Julian said, "Atheism (the Christian faith was called "atheism" because Christians didn't believe in the multiple gods of the Romans) has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans (Christ-followers!) care not only for their own poor, but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for help that we should render them."

Church, that's what it means to be salt and light!