

Jesus On (II):
Influence (Mt. 5:13-16)

Introduction

Okay, we've got the last preseason game out of the way.

This coming Sunday we kick off the regular season against Dallas.

Personally, I thought the preseason games went well and I'm optimistic about this year.

Praying over our offensive line - there'll be a time of fasting as well - but other than that, I think we're one of the most underrated teams in the NFL.

But however you feel, we love our football.

And about the only thing we love as much as our football are football movies. Particularly ones that inspire us like these:

Inspirational clip montage from football movies

Now, why are those movies so inspiring?

It's because we want our lives to count, we want our actions to matter, and we want to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

We want to make a difference.

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We want to be players in a game, not just sitting on the bench. We want to make an impact.

So here's my question: Are you? Am I?

Last week we started a series through the Sermon on the Mount and we're calling it "Jesus On...", because it captures what Jesus had to say on just about everything.

And this week it's about what Jesus had to say on influence. Difference-making. Living a life of significance.

What Jesus said about becoming the kind of person whose presence is felt in this world.

Let me read what He had to say, and it's going to seem tame on the surface. But when I unpack it you're going to see that this has teeth.

"You are the salt of the earth. But 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.

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:13-16, NIV)

How do you become a person of influence? Jesus says, "You become the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

Now that doesn't sound like much of a football speech, does it? Let's dig in and see.

I. The Salt of the Earth

Let's start off with salt.

In Jesus' day, salt was one of the most useful and important elements you could possess, but it wasn't because of what it did for the taste or seasoning of food.

In fact, in Jesus' day that wasn't even salt's primary use. Back then, the main use for salt was as a preservative.

They didn't have refrigerators or freezers. You couldn't buy things in cans. So they used salt to keep their food from spoiling.

For example, if you had a piece of meat that you couldn't eat right away, you'd take some salt and rub it into the meat.

And that salt, if rubbed in, would keep the meat from decay. It would keep it from going bad.

So when Jesus said that we should live a life that was like salt to the earth, He meant that we should live life in such a way that our very presence in the world acts like salt.

I'll never forget reading a book that came out by Alan Weisman called *The World Without Us*.

Weisman explored humanity's impact on the planet by asking us to envision our earth without the ongoing presence of people.

It's a fascinating book, and in it you find out how our massive infrastructure would collapse and finally vanish without human presence.

How just days after humans disappeared floods in New York's subways would start eroding the city's foundations, and how, as the world's cities crumbled, asphalt jungles would give way to real ones.

Here's a short visual taste of what would happen:

World Without Us Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6awTGUY-gw>

From :48 to 3:15

So what would happen if all Christian influence were withdrawn from the world tomorrow? How long would it be before the world felt the effects, if no salt was being applied?

As John Stott once wrote that,

"... the world is... putrefying. It cannot stop itself from going bad. Only salt introduced from outside can do this. The church... is set in the world... as salt to arrest - or at least to hinder - the process of social decay... God intends the most powerful of all restraints within sinful society to be his own redeemed, regenerate and righteous people."ⁱ

Now most of us don't think that our lives can do much to keep the world from decaying.

We tend to think that the individual acts of ordinary people are not that important, so the idea of our role in preventing societal decay - and thus making a difference with our life - is not taken very seriously.

That's for the Martin Luther King Jrs, the Nelson Mandelas.

We're so wrong. And Jesus wanted us to know we're wrong. That's why He gave the challenge to be that salt.

He knew that what would matter most would be the countless, seemingly small acts, by individuals like you and me, that would make the cumulative difference.

He's absolutely right. And you see this played out in the most basic of social studies.

In the 1980s, New York City was in the grip of one of the worst crime epidemics in its history. But then, suddenly and without warning, from a high in 1990, the crime rate went into a dramatic decline.

Murders dropped by two-thirds. Felonies were cut in half.

The most intriguing idea as to why is called the "Broken Windows Theory" - the brainchild of criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling.

They argued that crime is the inevitable result of disorder. If a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that that no one cares and no one is in charge.

Soon, more windows will be broken, and the sense of anarchy will spread from the building to the street on which it faces, sending a signal that anything goes.

The idea is that crime is contagious. It can start with a broken window and spread to an entire community. Which means that what matters is little things; little stands, to the spread of crime.

Which is exactly how New York City addressed the problem. The war was waged on broken windows. The war was waged on graffiti, focusing on the subways.

The cleanup took from 1984 to 1990. It soon spread to the entire city.

Seemingly little things, such as stopping turnstile-jumping on the subways, getting rid of the "squeegee men" who came up to drivers at intersections, and cracking down on public drunkenness and littering.

They took care of that, and crime began to fall across the city.ⁱⁱ

This is what Jesus was after.

When we live like salt, it impacts the world around us in disproportionate measure. *We are the mended windows and the scrubbed-off graffiti.*

But make no mistake - it's acting out in little ways that then leads to the big events, the big moments, the big opportunities.

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The little things don't just add up to big things - they can be seized by God and become big things.

I think of a 42-year-old woman who was on her way home from work on a cold December day. It was a day like any other day.

Getting on a public bus, she paid her fare and sat down on the first vacant seat. She was just glad to sit down, because her legs were tired.

As the bus filled with passengers, the driver turned around and told her that she would have to get up out of her seat and move to the back of the bus.

This was 1955. She was black and those seats were for whites. But just sat there and didn't move.

She wasn't an activist or a radical. Just a quiet, conservative, church-going woman with a nice family and a decent job as a seamstress. But she didn't move.

Maybe it was the injustice of it all. Maybe it was the years of persecution and abuse that she and millions of others had suffered for no other reason than the color of their skin.

Maybe she was tired of being treated as a second-class citizen, having to drink from certain fountains, go to certain bathrooms, or being forced into certain schools.

Whatever ran through her heart and mind, one thing was clear: this was wrong.

So she just did the small little thing and sat there.

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Then the driver began yelling at her, telling her to "Move it!"

And then the other passengers began to yell at her, push at her and swear at her. But she stayed right where she was.

So the driver stopped the bus, got off and called the police.

When they arrived, they hauled her off to jail.

But what they really did was haul her off into history.

Because that woman was Rosa Parks, and when she took her stand for what was right - or, rather, when she took her seat for what was right - the entire civil rights movement was ignited.

She didn't get on that bus looking for trouble, or with a planned attempt to make some kind of political statement.

She just wanted to go home - like everybody else.

And as a Christian, which she was, she knew she was made in the image of God. She knew she had dignity and worth.

For a wonderful, eternity filled moment, she was the salt of the earth.

And that kind of salt changes the world.

Friends, you can be salt anywhere. And you should be. I mean, bring this down to the lowest level:

You can be salt in the checkout line at the grocery store.

You can be salt online with social media with what you post on Facebook or Instagram or Twitter.

You can be salt in your neighborhood.

It's the only way you're going to make a difference.

II. The Light of the World

But Jesus also called people to make a difference by being the light of the world.

What is that about?

Whereas salt is about taking a stand, light is about revealing what is real - it's about showing the way.

Letting our light shine is having what Christ is doing in our life, and the truth about what Christ wants to do in everyone's lives, be wildly known.

Let's say you were diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. There was no known cure, and you were given less than a year to live.

Then a new, experimental drug came on the market, and you found out about it and gave it a try. And within three months, you were totally and completely cured.

Then you find out that someone you know has been diagnosed with the same disease.

Would you even think about not sharing your experience with them?

Would it even enter your mind not to let them know about what you discovered?

Of course not. It would be unthinkable, wouldn't it?

Telling them would be the most natural thing in the world to do, because you know it could save their life.

That's what Jesus meant when He said that to make a difference in this world, you need to shine the light.

People are in darkness, let the light out!

And that light is the message of Christ:

That He came into the world to show us the way to live and to provide the means for us to be in a right relationship with God.

So you can think of it this way:

Salt is a negative influence - meaning that it works *against* something.

Light is a positive influence - it's trying to *bring* something.

And both are needed for influence.

We work *against* moral and cultural decay.

We work *for* truth.

So we have a double task - to stop the decay and spread the truth. Or as we say around here, a call to serve the least and the lost.

The least are those who are being victimized by injustice and want, need and cruelty.

The lost are those who need the light to find their way to God.

III. The Choice

But that can't be where we leave it, because did you notice Jesus' language?

He didn't want to just TEACH this - He wanted to CHALLENGE people on this.

He said, "You ARE the salt of the earth" and "You ARE the light of the world."

It's as if He's saying:

"You and only you can play your part in stopping the world's moral decay;

... you and only you can shine the light where you are."

There is a salt, there is a light, that you have been given, that you have been trusted with, that only you can bring.

So what's it going to be?

The challenge here isn't to the world to get its act together - the challenge is for us to be who God has enabled us to be!

As someone once noted: "One can hardly blame unsalted meat for going bad. It cannot do anything else. The real question to ask is, 'Where is the salt?'"ⁱⁱⁱ

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He ups the ante even further.

He says that if the salt loses its saltiness - if it doesn't function like salt - then it's worthless.

Some people seem to think that the goal is retain as much salt for themselves and in themselves as possible. And they think the way to keep salt from losing its saltiness is to retreat from the world - to make sure that you don't interact with it or get polluted so you don't lose any of your saltiness.

That is absolutely the opposite of what Jesus is saying.

He's saying that the way to lose your saltiness, the way to be irrelevant, to have no influence at all, to make the salt in our lives meaningless, is to never have it interact with the decay of the world.

Not only will that ensure the world dies, but you will too.

Because that's the way salt works!

It's either used proactively, or it becomes destructive to the one who has it.

For example, most people have heard of the Dead Sea.

Do you know why it's dead? Why nothing lives in it? It's because it has such heavy mineral content that the water cannot support life of any kind. It's so full with minerals, it chokes out life.

So why is it so salty it's dead? It's because there's no outlet for the water that flows in, to then flow out.

And if it doesn't flow out, it stagnates. It doesn't stay fresh. It can't support life. It dies.

Our bodies are the same way.

If our bodies don't give off salt through perspiration, we retain water and become bloated, and eventually, can have all kinds of medical complications - including death.

Folks, what's true in nature and true of our bodies, is true spiritually.

The goal is not to keep ourselves as salty as possible by retreating from the world, but to keep ourselves as salty as possible so that we can give that salt to the world.

But even worse than isolation is having no salt or light at all.

Someone who is a Christian in name only, but the world never feels the weight of their relationship with Christ because it's so minimal, so superficial - that life is on the bench.

And they'll stay on that bench. And they'll die on the bench. Having never made a single play in the game they were called to play in.

Folks, Christianity is not about a life that is *informed* with certain truths.

It's not about a life that is *conformed* to certain practices and rituals;

It's about a life that has been *transformed* through a relationship with the living God.

And when you allow yourself to be transformed, then you become salt and light. You can't help it.

You're just salty. You're just light-bringing.

If you are an authentic Christ follower, people should sense something about you that is not of this world.

That is radically different than what they have going on.

They should pick up that there is something in your friendships, your marriage, your parenting, the way you work, the decisions you make, the values you hold, that they don't have.

There should be moments in your day-in, day-out living, your interacting, your leading, your following, that reveal the salt and light of Jesus.

If that isn't happening - and it's your choice whether it does or not - then the world will decay and continue to grope around in the dark.

And I really do mean it's your choice.

If you are truly a follower of Christ, then you would have to suppress this in your life.

Try and keep it buried. Or, as Jesus said, putting the light under a bowl. And many do.

Some because they are embarrassed or awkward, but more because they just don't think they have a responsibility to be that light.

One of the most tragic events in recent American history occurred in New York City in 1964.

A young woman from Queens named Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death. But it was no ordinary murder.

She was chased by her assailant and attacked three times on the street over the course of half an hour, while 38 of her neighbors watched from their windows.

During the entire ordeal, not a single person came to her aid. Not a single person shouted out or called for help. No one ran to her aid or came to her rescue. No one even bothered to pick up a phone to call the police. They simply watched.

Now why did they do that?

Two New York City psychologists - one from Columbia University and the other from NYU - decided they wanted to dig deeper into what they called the "Bystander Problem."

In a fascinating set of studies outlined by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point*, these two psychologists decided they would stage a series of emergencies of differing kinds and in different settings in order to see who would come to help.

They found out that one single factor determined whether people responded to a need.

It wasn't the severity of the crisis. It wasn't the degree to which the person screamed or called for help.

It wasn't even the characteristics of the people in the experiment - whether they were young or old, male or female, black or white.

What mattered was how many witnesses there were to the event.

The more people who were around, the less people tended to respond.

In one of the experiments, they had a student who was alone in a room stage an epileptic fit.

When there was just one person next door listening, that person rushed to the student's aid 85% of the time.

But when the test subjects thought that there were as few as four others who *also* overheard the person having the seizure, they came to the student's aid only 31% of the time.

From 85% response to 31% response - just because the sense of personal responsibility had been spread out.

The essence of what the two psychologists discovered is that when people are in a group, responsibility for taking personal action is diffused. It gets watered down.

People assume that someone else will make the call, report the problem or respond to the need.

So in the case of Kitty Genovese, social psychologists argue that the lesson isn't that no one called *despite* the fact that 38 people heard her scream, it's that no one called *because* 38 people heard her scream.

If she had been attacked on a lonely street with just one witness, she might have lived.

That one person might have felt a sense of obligation to respond. They would have been moved by the fact that it really was up to them.

Jesus is wanting to cut through the bystander problem.

In fact, each of His affirmations in the original Greek begins with the emphatic pronoun "you," as if to say:

"You and only you" are the earth's salt.

"You and only you" are the world's light.

You have a personal responsibility.

Friends, there is a great revolution that has been set in motion by God through Jesus for the reclaiming of the world.

You're either in or your out.

You're salty or you have no taste at all.

You're light or you just part of the dark.

For those of us who claim to follow Christ, there's a target on the wall.

First and foremost, it's reaching out to a lost and dying world with the one and only message that can transform someone's entire eternity.

A mission so clear that it's called the Great Commission.

That's the light we are to bring. Without shame, without awkwardness, without reserve. But with the Great Commission comes a cultural commission.

To work toward the Kingdom of God taking hold on the planet in governments and institutions, judicial systems and media.

I was in Johannesburg, South Africa, on the 10th anniversary of the end of Apartheid. I remember thinking that anniversary came because people worked for God's Kingdom.

Years before I was in Moscow, worshiping in a church filled to capacity, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Seeing the front rows filled with women wearing scarves, singing with a passion and intensity that was captivating, I leaned over to the pastor and asked through my interpreter who the women were.

I'll never forget his answer.

He said, "Those are the women who prayed and then lived communism out of Russia."

I've stood next to those who rescue trafficked children from the brothels in the Philippines; those who are attempting to save AIDS orphans in Africa.

The Kingdom is meant to *come*.

That's the salt we are to bring.

Which means the real Christian is always a revolutionary. They are always a radical. They are always dangerous.

At least, that's the plan.

It reminds me of a story that Soren Kierkegaard once told about a make-believe country where only ducks live.

On Sunday mornings all the ducks came into church, waddled down the aisle, waddled into their pews and squatted.

Then the duck minister came in, took his place behind the duck pulpit, opened the Duck Bible and read: "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Ducks - you have wings!"

All the ducks yelled "Amen!" and then they all waddled home.

Jesus says to you:

"You are salt - be it!"

"You are light - shine it!"

Conclusion

So let's bring this home. Let's make this real.

Right now, you've got friends at work, people on your street, acquaintances at the gym, who you know are one invitation away from coming to hear what Jesus would mean for their life.

Are you going to invite them?

Right now, this church is attempting to support ministries here in Charlotte and around the world that serve orphans, widows, the human-trafficked, the homeless, the hungry.

Are you being generous financially in a way that lets us do that to our fullest potential?

Right now, are you even thinking about social justice issues? Does your heart break over sexism and racism?

Right now, are you praying?

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If we live in world where there is more violence, more injustice, more racism, more division, more perversion, more crime, more hate, could it be because there is less praying?

Less people who should be salt and light on their knees?

Right now, you interact with all kinds of people in all kinds of ways. What do they notice about you? What do think about you?

Do they sense something about you that is not of this world, or do they simply see you as one more person who is very much of this world, just like they are. Maybe even more worldly than they are.

Right now, thousands are serving here at Meck in a way that makes a difference:

- ... changing a child's life,
- ... putting marriages back together,
- ... strengthening families,
- ... caring for the poor,
- ... building houses for the homeless,
- ... visiting the elderly,
- ... stocking food pantries,

... conveying the message of Christ to those with questions and doubts.

Are you going to just sit back and be a consumer, week after week, watching everybody else move the ball down the field?

Or are you going to get off the bench and get in the game with the rest of us?

And don't tell me you don't know how. Don't tell me it looks like everything is covered. Don't tell me that you're not needed.

That's everything Jesus was trying to go to war against!

That's denying you are to be salt and light.

That's the bystander problem.

What kind of excuse would it be to stand before Jesus one day and He says, "Why weren't you in the game?" and you answer, "Well, nobody ever asked me."

You're not supposed to have to be asked!

Jesus didn't say the government was the light of the world.

He didn't say education was.

He didn't say the marketplace was.

He didn't say the court system was.

He didn't say the media was.

He said *you* were.

Acting as an individual, right where you are.

You are the salt, so be it.

You are the light, so shine it.

Don't. Waddle. Home.

Let's stand for a closing prayer.

ⁱ John R.W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (IVP).

ii. On this, see Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company: 2000), pp. 133-168. Gladwell calls this phenomenon the "Power of Context," and in terms of epidemics of behavior, contends that we are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur.

iii. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 65.