

As far as I know, no one in our church came to faith in Christ because of a direct interaction with our risen Lord. Each of us is the beneficiary of someone who had the courage and faith to live and speak in a way that was different from, and more compelling than, what the world was saying and doing. It might have been your parents, friend, co-worker, a pastor, or a stranger...or Billy Graham. Through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, all of us who are followers of Christ responded to these people's words and actions by putting our faith in him. If they lived no differently than the rest of the world, if they didn't stand out, their message would not have been compelling. But because they lived appealing and bright lives, we were willing to listen.

The Church Jesus is building has been called to stand out. It has been created for significant impact. From the beginning, the people of God have been called to live differently than the world to bless it and change it through our actions and by openly living out our faith. That doesn't happen by accident, though. As the cultural headwinds buffet the Church, we may be tempted to compromise by aligning ourselves with the rest of the world, making it impossible to differentiate a believer in Jesus with an unbeliever, or we may be tempted to withdraw to safety. Either approach will lead to a diminishing impact of the Church, and a diminishing interest in our message and our Messiah. What is made to be appealing and bright will become dull and dim. Thankfully Jesus has a word on how we press on.

This morning, as we continue in our series called *To Be Continued*, we turn our attention outward. We have spent three weeks talking about who we are as the Church and to each other. Now we will begin discussing who and what God calls us to be in the world. In Matthew 5, Jesus gives us two images to show us how we are supposed to impact the world.

As many of you know, chapter 5 begins the Sermon on the Mount. The Jews had lost their way. Their God-given purpose was to point people to the one true God. But the religious leaders had become abusive to their own people, subjecting them to the bondage of the Law, and they had abdicated their national responsibility to, as Isaiah says, be a light to the Gentiles to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth. Jesus taught both to correct the Jews thinking and action and also to begin casting vision for the people who would ultimately be the first members of his Church. He described the conduct of a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. It was not a bunch of rules or checklist to follow. It was the conduct that flowed out of a right relationship with him, and included things like mercy, meekness, mourning, peace, and longsuffering. Then he called them to this:

**[Matthew 5:13-16] <sup>13</sup> "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. <sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**

Jesus uses the images of salt and light to communicate the impact we are to have in this world. We are to live this way to manifest good works that will be witnessed by the world and cause others to turn to God and glorify him. Character and conduct are two vital aspects of evangelism. I have said a number of times that you can show someone Jesus long before you ever mention his name. But the converse of that is also true. We can live in a way that leaves people disinterested in hearing

about our Savior or, worse, blaming Him for the repellant actions of his people. A winsome Christian is a conduit to conversion. Salt and light give us a vision for how we are to engage the world.

Let's start with salt. Salt was a valuable and important commodity in biblical times. In fact, it was often part of a soldier's compensation, which is why we have the phrase "He's not worth his salt." If you want to do some fascinating reading, go out and look at all the different ideas people have about what Jesus meant by using salt. Everyone is certain it's one or two. I'm crazy enough to think Jesus may have been smart enough to mean all of them!

**The Church counteracts decay.** Salt has been used as a preservative for centuries. Families would often use it to keep meat from spoiling, allowing food to be consumed over several days. Of course, they were not feeding the Pressler boys, who rarely leave leftovers. Salt also has antiseptic qualities. While it may sting when applied to a wound, it helps kill infection. If you've ever jumped into salt water when you had a cut on your body, you know it doesn't feel good. But it cleans your wound.

Our world has been in a perpetual state of decay ever since sin and death entered into it through Adam and Eve. It's very easy to look around and see that sin is having its way with creation. War, crime, death, injustice, famine, division...just to name a few. And while that won't be fully resolved until Jesus returns and makes all things new, he has given his Church to be a force for good in this world and to push back against the decay. The litmus test for any church to see if they are having an impact in the world is to consider if they'd be missed if they were gone. I am certain Fellowship Dallas would be missed if we left, and I want to share some examples of our impact.

I think of our work with Exodus Ministries. This organization empowers formerly incarcerated mothers and their children to achieve a productive and fulfilling life through Jesus Christ. We have a young adult life group led by Jon and Taylor Siemens who go and watch children at Exodus so their moms can attend Bible study classes led by Mary Breunig and Kim Bergman. Our work there communicates to these mothers they are valuable, they have something to offer, their children need them, and there is a way other than a life of crime.

**The Church creates appetite.** We can make people's spiritual tummies rumble with spiritual hunger. Salt is delicious! It makes food vibrant. Martha made an incredible dinner on Friday and I almost stopped halfway through to pray for the meal again and thank God for salt! When people eat food that is flavorful, delicious, they want another bite. They want more and more.

The people of God are to give the world a taste of the Kingdom of God. This world is starving for the truth, it's starving for love, it's starving for goodness, it's starving for compassion, it's starving for hope. We have been given the charge to make others savor the things of heaven.

There is a Life Group in Lake Highlands who have essentially adopted a family who moved here from Africa. This family's parents are both ill and the burden of caring for the eight of them has fallen on the 23-year-old son who grew up in our Student Ministry. This Life Group has helped with school supplies, holidays, hospital visits. They have invited these children to participate in family activities. One family in the group has even added a second bed to their son's room

because one of these kids has become such a fixture in the house. It's a ministry of presence. They also help transport this family to and from Fellowship. I also learned there's an attorney at Fellowship who's helping the son navigate benefits. This family is getting taste after taste of Jesus, and they will continue to grow up and want more, and be inclined to give others a taste.

**The Church cultivates growth.** In biblical times, salt was often used as a fertilizer. Now, don't go home and dump a bunch of table salt on your grass and then come back next week blaming me for your dead lawn. The salt pulled out of the Dead Sea was full of other nutrients and minerals not found in your can of Morton's. Fertilizer prepares the ground for life to spring from it.

The soil of an unbeliever's heart can be hard and lifeless. It is not capable of yielding life on its own. There will be no spiritual fruit. As salt, we cultivate the soil for life to spring from it. Now, it's ultimately God who creates that life. As Paul said about the church in Corinth: I planted, Apollos watered, but God grows it. We prepare the soil for God to grow the Church.

Our Refugee Connect Initiative works with some of the Syrian refugees who arrived in Dallas in the last couple of years. Many have left their entire lives behind, and most come from a different faith background. While we serve them practically by helping them navigate our school system, we really are looking for ways to build relationships with them, serve them, and love them. Cheryl Read says she and her husband Chris are surrogate grandparents to one family's children. These relationships allow us to share our faith, talk about why we celebrate Christmas and Easter, and what our motivation is to help them. These relationships cultivate the soil of their hearts and prepare them to accept and receive the life that only God can give.

**The Church casts illumination.** The image of light is so foundational to describing the people and work of the Church that it is used in nineteen New Testament books. I believe that is because of what Jesus said about himself.

**[John 8:12] <sup>12</sup> Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."**

Jesus is the light, he has saved us from the darkness, and given us the light of life; himself. That light, though, is not just for us. We're called to give it to others.

**[Philippians 2:15] <sup>15</sup> that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.**

Our identity is that we are children of God. Out of that identity we live a life pleasing to God and in contrast to the world. And the impact that life has is to light the way for others. Light casts out darkness. And in this dark world, the lives of Jesus-followers should be radiant. We should be unmistakable. We should be unavoidable. And when people are attracted to our light, we then illuminate the path to salvation through Jesus Christ. Like a lighthouse is the guide home for a ship stuck in dark, rough seas, we shine the light that guides people to eternal life in THE Light.

So then what prevents us from doing that? Jesus says saltiness can be lost. Light can be hidden. In a recent survey, 42% of respondents say people of faith are part of the problems of our country. Now, that includes more than Christians, but we are certainly part of that perception. Remember the first week of the series, we looked at the new church in Acts 2. They were loving each other and loving their neighbors and it said, “they were having favor with all the people and God was adding to their number day by day.” They were living as salt and light, and it resulted in people becoming followers of Christ. What is it that prevents us from having the same impact?

**Focus on self:** We are too busy, other people are too messy, and God wants me to be too holy. Our pace of life leaves little time or energy for others. Only imperfect people need a Savior, so if we are going to be salt and light to messy people, we might get a little messy ourselves. It’s much easier to virtue-signal on Facebook than to be face-to-face with someone who’s desperate for Jesus. The life God calls us to includes boundaries he’s put in place, and sometimes, we’d rather make the rules. Disobedience is rejection of the light. And if we are in the midst of rejecting the light, we won’t be able to pass it on to others. Jesus’ call on our lives asks for nothing less than that we would die to ourselves.

**Fear:** As Christianity becomes less popular in our nation, it becomes riskier to be identified as one. Many of us fear being ostracized, labeled as a hater, or dismissed as a religious nut. We’re not ready for our faith to come at a cost. Our reflex is either to get combative or get reclusive. We may begin to look at the world as our opponent instead of our mission field, or we may be tempted to hide what we believe and go with the flow. But the words Jesus spoke just before calling us salt and light says those who are reviled by the world are blessed and are to rejoice and be glad because we will be rewarded in heaven. We can be free of fear because God doesn’t leave us alone when difficulty comes.

**Joylessness:** We can’t captivate others with the Gospel if we are not captivated by it ourselves. Joy is delight and fulfillment in the person and promises of God. If we don’t rest in the person and hope in the promise, we won’t experience joy. That’s because if you strip a relationship with Jesus out of the Gospel, all you end up with is religion. Then we’ll spend more of our energy doing church rather than being the church.

You know what joyless Christians are? Bland. They have no flavor. You ever met a person who, because of health reasons, has been told by a doctor they can no longer eat salt? How disinterested are they in their food? It’s so sad! And to that person, everyone who puts salt on their meal does so with great enthusiasm! You know what they get? Lemon wedges. A joyless Christian isn’t appealing to anyone. That’s why Jesus’ command in John 15 is to abide in him, to make our home in him, to be in an intimate relationship with him. When we do that, his joy will be in us, and our joy will be full. And there are few things more attractive than a person bursting with joy.

**Who are your “others”?** V16 says to let your light shine before others. Who is that for you? Who has God placed in your life to give a taste of the Kingdom and to shine bright in the darkness to? Look, when Jesus says “**Go** and make disciples...” he’s telling some to get up, pack your stuff, and go somewhere else (we’ll talk about that more next week). But you know where

else he's telling us to go? Where he's already placed us. He just wants us to go with a newfound intent and the expectation that we can make an impact.

We often use a phrase around here that highlights the access we have to others. It's "where you live, work, and play". You are a neighbor, you are a friend, you are a co-worker, you are a PTA member, you are a teammate or a fishing buddy, you go on campouts with other moms and dads and their kids, and if you have kids, you go to bed and wake up on the mission field. If you are wondering who God has called you to be salt and light to, wake up tomorrow and start writing down the names of everyone you come into contact with. My guess is that is your answer.

**What impact are you having on your "others"?** In other words, how salty and bright are you? What is your conduct and character communicating about God? Whether you want them to or not, the world is watching, and they are evaluating you, the Church, and the Lord. Are you a person of care and concern? Are you for me? Can I trust the answers you will give me to my biggest questions? I don't tell you this to shame you, scare you, or discourage you. I tell you this because it means you have potential. You have an incredible opportunity to make an impact not only in this world, but an impact for all of eternity. God has put you in this place and in this time and has surrounded you with people he wants to draw to himself through you.

We close in the dark with each person turning on their cell phones from left to right. We can fill this room with light. We are called to fill the whole world with light. We have been saved by the Light. We are carriers of the Light. Now let's go be beacons of Light and make Him known.