

How to live with purpose: Jesus on mission

Extreme Makeover: Soul Edition (Episode 2)

Matthew 5:7-16

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 29 May 2005

A. Introduction

One of the most powerful and impacting moments in the history of the twentieth century was Martin Luther King speaking at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC. In a very real sense that speech, that sermon, changed the world. It galvanised thousands of struggling, disenfranchised Black Americans to persevere in their fight against racial segregation. Let's read some words from another sermon, the greatest sermon ever preached: Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Let's read Matthew 5:13-16.

If you were to summarise in just three words the basic message of this text what would it be? *Impact the world*. Look at the two metaphors that Jesus uses. Salt and light. We think of salt primarily as a condiment, a spice that enhances the flavour of food – helpful, but not critical. But, in the centuries before electricity and refrigeration – in Jesus' time – salt was primarily used as a preservative. It was rubbed into meat to preserve it, to keep it from going bad. It was crucial item in every house, as crucial as a refrigerator – or a Playstation. And while we tend today to take light for granted – if it's dark, flick on a switch – in Jesus' day, without electricity, the nights were very dark. A whole household might rely on the flickering flame of a single candle. So when Jesus says to his followers here, "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world" he's saying, "You – and you only – can keep this world from moral and spiritual decay. You and you only can illuminate the darkness and show people the truth about God. It's not enough to subscribe to a set of beliefs about me or to engage in certain spiritual practices; you are to impact the world." Now remember, Jesus is speaking here to a handful of Palestinian peasants. He saying to ordinary people like you and me, spiritually poor, aching, broken, desperate people, "You can change this world." Maybe not all of us in headline grabbing ways like Martin Luther King, but in very real, practical, everyday ways. And in this passage Jesus explains how. He gives two powerful principles for impacting the world.

B. The purity principle

The first is what I'd call the purity principle. Look at v 13: "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." Now strictly speaking, salt can never actually lose its saltiness – sodium chloride is a very stable chemical compound – but it can be so contaminated by mixture with impurities that it is rendered useless. If we become so assimilated and contaminated by the impurities of our world, we lose our influence, our savour. Jesus is saying we need to be distinctive, as different from our culture as light is from dark. Not weird different – not Ned Flanders different – but different in character, in attitude. Last week we looked at what Jesus teaches about our attitude towards *God*. He goes on in the verses that immediately precede this passage to outline the kind of counter-cultural attitudes we should have towards *other people* if our salt is to have savour and our light is to be bright. Let's look at them.

Blessed are the merciful (v 7)

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." Blessed, in other words, are those who show compassion for people who suffer – the hungry, the sick, the unpopular, the lonely. When I was at university for an assignment I had to interview Kate Belgrave, a journalist who was then with the *New Zealand Herald*. She was known for her cynical, caustic views about Christians. I remember sitting there in her living room, hearing her and her flatmate savage Christians. But then her flatmate said something that I've never forgotten. "But the Sallies, they're a different. I like them. They care for people." The willingness of a few Christians to show mercy to those in need impacted that woman. She's not the first. In eighteenth century England reform of the prison system and penal code, the rise of trade unions, hospitals and orphanages, and the abolition of slavery and child labour, were all ignited and fuelled by followers of Jesus. Is it any coincidence that during this period hundreds of thousands of people throughout England were drawn into the kingdom of God? The light was shining brightly.

Blessed are the pure in heart (v 8)

Then Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart” (v 8). Blessed are those whose private thoughts and words and actions match their public personas. Jesus is talking about integrity here – who you are when no one’s looking. Live with integrity and you “will see God.” You will see him working through your life, touching others. In 1990 King Baudouin of Belgium temporarily abdicated his throne. You know why? He could not conscientiously sign an abortion bill passed by parliament. Integrity. Make notice it, respect it. But the reverse is also true. I was having lunch a few weeks back with a group of lawyers, some guys with whom I used to work. None of them are Christians. We got talking about the church, and the conversation moved to Graham Capill, the disgraced former leader of the Christian Heritage Party. It turns out that he was making public pronouncements about the way we should live at the very time he was privately committing the most appalling crimes. One of my mates, a guy for whom I’ve prayed for years, spat out in scorn: “And there he was telling *us* how to live?!” You want to shine brightly? It’ll take compassion and integrity. And one other quality.

Blessed are the peacemakers (v 9)

In v 9 Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Who was the greatest peacemaker ever? The Son of God, the “Prince of Peace.” Jesus laid down his life to bring us peace with God (Romans 5:1) and peace with each other (Ephesians 2:4). So whenever we extend that sort of grace to people who don’t deserve it, people who hurt us, we reflect his character, God’s character. That’s why Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, *for they will be called children of God.*” Bud Welch was a peacemaker. His daughter, Julie Marie, was killed in Oklahoma City in 1995 when Timothy McVeigh blew up the Federal building with a truck bomb. It turns out that in the year or so following his daughter’s death, Bud Welch developed something of a routine. A couple of times a week he’d ring up the father of the guy who killed his daughter. Not to abuse him, as you’d expect, but to comfort him in the months leading up to Timothy’s execution. Bud’s rationale was this: “He’s going to lose a son. I know what it’s like to lose a child.” That’s not to say he found it easy. In the months immediately after the bombing his feelings of rage and vengeance were so strong that he would best describe it as a period of temporary insanity. But somehow he emerged from that helpless rage committed to displaying love and concern to another man who was suffering in his own way almost as much. One newspaper columnist – an atheist – was so struck by that response he wrote this: “What infinite love and charity that man expresses through his Christian faith.” Jesus meant it when he said (v 16), “Let your light shine before people, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

But that’s not to say that if we live this kind of life everyone will respond like this. Jesus says in verses 10-12, “Live a pure, distinctive, righteous life, and you will meet resistance.” Martin Luther King did. Mother Teresa did. We shouldn’t be surprised by that. Paul says in Ephesians 6 that our fight is not against “flesh and blood,” but against the “principalities and powers” of this dark world. Commit to living this kind of life, step out in faith for God, and the forces of evil will be unleashed against you. Expect it. Expect difficulties. Whatever you do, don’t bail. Don’t; give in. “Rejoice,” Jesus says, “Yours is the kingdom of heaven.” God is with you. And with compassion, integrity, and grace, you can change the world.

So let’s press pause, and do a little exercise. Look at your newsletter. What’s your compassion quotient like? If you were to score yourself on a scale from 0 to 5, where would you be? Are you exhibiting compassion? Exuding integrity? Extending grace? How can you keep our lives moving towards the right?

C. The proximity principle

There’s one other powerful principle tucked away in these verses: the proximity principle. Jesus says in v 15 that people don’t “light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand – in a prominent place – and it gives light to everyone in the house.” If we’re the light of the world, people need to see us. In the same way, if salt is going to impact food, it has to be rubbed into the meat, penetrate the meat. It has to get close. Do you see the tension? Jesus says, “Be different. But get involved.” They’ve done studies on people who become followers of Jesus. You know what happens

over time, as they enter into a Christian community and grow in their faith? On the one hand their attitudes change – they start to stand out against their background. But at the very same time their number of close unbelieving friends slowly drops away until, after many years, they don't have any close meaningful non-Christian friends at all. Their salt, their light, isn't impacting anyone. If you've been following Jesus for a while now, how many close unbelieving friends do you have? How many of them would you feel comfortable inviting to a church service? I wouldn't want to answer that question. The point is we need to be really intentional about getting involved in our world. It might be a local rugby team, a political party, a Music for Me programme.

When you think about it, the people who have had the greatest impact in this world as salt and light are the people who were crystal clear on where God wanted them to get involved. That's what has so struck me about Mother Teresa. She knew that Jesus had called her to serve the poorest of the poor. That was her salt and light mission. And she gave her life to it, in spite of the difficulties and criticism she faced. How clear are you about your calling? Could you – as Peter Drucker says – print it on the front of a T-shirt? Are you that clear? Business consultants say that an effective mission statement should satisfy three criteria: it should be short (just one sentence), simple (simple enough for a twelve year to understand it), and it should so saturate your psyche that if at any time, day or night, you were asked, you could instantly and reflexively say what it is. What would Jesus wear on the front of his T-shirt? "Seek and save the lost." What about Paul? "Plant churches where there aren't any." William Wilberforce? "End slavery." Martin Luther King? "End segregation." Pam Aston, our children and families ministry leader. Her T-shirt would say "Kids matter." Emma Fieten, who's working with our teenagers? "Share Jesus with young people." Me? I think back to a day when I was sitting in a church service a little like this and I heard the words of Jesus: "Do you love me? Then feed my sheep." I guess my T-shirt would say, "Preach the Word of God." Until I get new orders, that's my calling. That's what I'm giving my life to.

What about you? What are you giving your life to? How clear are you right now about your salt and light calling? Could you write it down in one sentence? You were given a candle as you came into the service. Here's your homework. Some time this week would you light that candle and, while it's burning, work out and write down – or revise – your salt and light mission. One sentence. If it would help, email it to me. I'd love to see it. We started with Martin Luther King. Let me finish with some words he once said. "A man has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his own existence to the broader concerns of all humanity." You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are called to impact this world. So let's do that.

Questions

1. "Impact the world." Do you think that's a fair summary of Jesus teaching in Matthew 5:13-16?
2. Just as salt used to be rubbed into meat to keep it from going rotten, we are to keep our world from going bad. Are we succeeding? Give examples.
3. What does it mean to be the light of the world? Give examples.
4. Read Matthew 5:7. What opportunities have you had recently to "show mercy"? How would you answer someone who said that this verse suggests that we earn God's mercy by showing mercy to others?
5. What in practical terms would it mean for you to be "pure in heart" (Matthew 5:8)? What benefit does it bring, and how?
6. In what ways does Jesus call us to "make peace" (Matthew 5:9)? In what situations can you think of where you could contribute something positive in this area? Why will those who make peace be called "children of God"?
7. What experience have you had of the opposition Jesus describes in verses 10-12?
8. How many close non-Christian friends do you have? How many would you feel comfortable inviting to church?
9. What would your T-shirt say if you were to write a one-sentence summary of how God wants you to get involved as salt and light in this world?