

A Formula For Reaching Your Friends

Forty Days of Friendship, Week 2

Matt 5:13-16

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 12 March 2006

Introduction

One of the most frustrating experiences in life is to be told what to do without being given a clear idea of how to go about doing it. Wouldn't you agree? When I practised as a lawyer I remember sitting in the senior partner's office during my first annual performance review. He said to me, "You achieved your budget last year. Well done. So this year we're going to increase your budget. We want you to do more work. Bill more hours. Write off less time. Make us more money. But how you get it all done is *your* problem." At school I had teachers who used to delight in handing out one assignment after the other. They'd bark out instructions: "Read this. Write that. Work it out. Hand it in." They seemed completely unconcerned that we had four other classes with equally high demands. We just had to work it all out, somehow. To this day my one recurring nightmare is forgetting to complete the coursework for one of my classes.

A Divine Plan

Even in church we can be bombarded with the message that we ought to have loving relationships, effective prayer lives, strong marriages, generous lifestyles. But while the "ought to" comes through loud and clear, the "how to" often remains distant and muffled. One place where this is especially true is in the challenge to have an evangelistic impact on our friends. The Bible is clear: "Your friends matter to God. He wants to reach them. And you're his chosen ambassador. So get out there and bring them to Christ." Great. But how? What does the process look like? What are the steps? Thank God he didn't leave us without a plan. He's given us the information we need to start us on the path of effectively reaching our friends. One day, as Jesus was sitting with his followers on a hill overlooking the sparkling waters of Galilee, this is what he said:

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 and trampled by men. 14>You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15Neither 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. 16In 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).

In these few short words, Jesus outlines a basic formula for reaching our friends. Here it is:

$$\mathbf{HP + CP + CC = MI}$$

It looks like something out of a chemistry textbook, doesn't it? But it's actually a set of basic principles – a formula – containing God's strategy for reaching our friends. Any guesses what these cryptic symbols mean? What about the last symbol, MI? It stands for *Maximum Impact*. Jesus says in this short passage that we are to arrange our lives so that we have the highest possible spiritual influence on those around us – that they might end up "praising our Father in heaven" (5:16). That's the goal. Maximum spiritual impact. But how do we achieve that? What are these elements needed to reach that goal? Let's examine each of these components. We're going to focus particularly on the first one today.

High Potency

To do that, let's start by asking the question: Why did Jesus use the metaphor of salt to describe his followers? Today, salt is a commodity we take for granted, but in the ancient world it was hugely valuable. Roman soldiers were given their rations in salt, and they would revolt if those rations were reduced. Our English word for "salary" literally means "salt money." Every time someone says, "He's not worth his salt," it's a reminder of just how prized salt was back then. In the days before Kelvinox, salt was the preservative that kept meat from going bad. And it's always served a crucial function as a spice to enhance the flavour of food. There are few culinary experiences quite as exquisite as eating a ripe avocado sprinkled with salt. But too much salt. Because too much salt makes us thirsty. Do you know that's why some bars serve salty peanuts free of charge: to get their customers to drink more! So when you think about the effect of salt, it saves or preserves, it spices things up, and it stimulates thirst. By using this image Jesus is saying that when we live Spirit-filled, Christ-centred, God-honouring lives, we will have this kind of effect on those around us. We'll hold others back from moral decay, we'll spice up their lives, we'll create a spiritual thirst in them.

But I wonder if there are other reasons why Jesus chose the salt metaphor, reasons that can be easily overlooked. In order for salt to have an impact, it must have savour, potency. In v 13 Jesus said that if salt loses its saltiness, it's no longer good for anything. It won't stimulate much thirst. It won't add much spice. It won't save. It must be salty, potent. So that's the first element in Jesus' formula: HP means *High Potency*. If we're going to influence people who are outside the family of God, we must have a strong enough concentration of Christ's influence in our lives that his power and presence will be undeniable to others. In practical terms, what does that mean? Look at the verses immediately preceding this passage. Jesus outlines the kinds of counter-cultural attitudes that will impact our friends.

1. Compassion

The first is compassion. "Blessed are the merciful" (Matt 5:7). Blessed are those who show compassion towards those who need it. I wish this week I'd been at the funeral of a lady called Mima Kitchen. She just died. Years ago, she and her husband, Lloyd, were leaving a home group together, when their car was struck by another car travelling on the wrong side of the road. Lloyd was killed. Mima ended up in hospital. While she was there, just days after the accident, she spoke to the young man at fault. Guess what she said. "One life has already been destroyed by this accident. I don't want to see another life destroyed. I forgive you. And I want you to forgive yourself." When she got out of hospital, Mima stayed in contact with that young man. She even paid him to paint her house, so that he would have enough money to get through university. I don't need to tell you what kind of impact Mima had on that young guy. A clear, consistent demonstration of God's love is a powerful magnet that pulls people towards him.

2. Authenticity

Another quality that does that is authenticity. In v 8 Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart." Blessed are those who are real. I heard recently a story about a newly promoted colonel who had moved into a new makeshift office during the first Gulf War. He had just arrived and was getting things organised, when out of the corner of his eye he sees a private coming his way, carrying a tool box. Wanting to seem important, he quickly spun around and picked up his phone. "Yes, General Schwarzkopf. Yes, yes, of course. I think that's an excellent plan. You've got my support on it. Thanks for checking with me. Let's touch base again soon, Norm. Good bye." He briskly hung up and turned around. "And what can I do for you?" he asked the private. "Ah," came the rather sheepish reply, "I'm just here to hook up your phone." There's so much deception in our world – people pretending to be more than they are, people refusing to own up to their mistakes – that to simply be your self, to openly express your emotions, to humbly admit your errors, to courageously own your beliefs (however unpopular they may be) can have a real impact. Live with authenticity, Jesus says, and you "will see God." You will see him working through your life to touch others.

3. Sacrifice

There's one more quality that encourages spiritually sensitive people to consider Christianity or themselves. In v 9 Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Blessed are those who extend grace to people who don't deserve it. Blessed are those who are willing to make sacrifices for others, giving up their time, their money, their rights. Do this and you "will be called children of God." You will reflect your heavenly Father's character. Last year Martien Keldermann told us about a little bunch of Christians who were gathering at their place of work to pray for their colleagues. Nothing seemed to happen. Then they decided that they would look for an opportunity to sacrificially meet the felt needs of their co-workers. They noticed that the receptionist, a young lady, was looking drained and exhausted. One of them asked why. It turned out that her little children were keeping her and her partner awake at night, sucking them dry, without any opportunity for times of refreshment. So that little team of Christ-followers got together and came up with a plan. They said to her, "Here's a couple of hundred dollars for you and your partner to go away for a weekend's holiday. Treat yourself to a nice hotel. And we'll baby-sit your kids. You know us pretty well. If you're prepared to trust us, we'd like to do that for you." That one act of sacrifice prompted more questions, provoked more curiosity, than any of their prayers. The thing is any of us could do something like this. Whenever we choose to sacrifice our time or money or rights for someone else, they can't help but take notice. It's potent.

A good question to ask is, "How do you develop and maintain this kind of compassionate, authentic, sacrificial lifestyle?" I wish I could say there's a magic wand. But there isn't. There are no shortcuts. Our level of savour, our potency, will be roughly proportionate to the extent to which we engage in the age-old spiritual disciplines: Daily contact with God and his Word. Rubbing shoulders with other Christians in small groups where masks come off, truth is shared, and love is received. It's these sorts of disciplines that keep us open to the Spirit's leadings, loving and tender before God and people. Salty.

Close Proximity

But even the most highly potent, industrial-strength salt can't produce any results unless it touches something. You can't expect salt left in the pantry to flavour the avocados on your plate. There's got to be contact. That brings us to the second element in this equation: *Close Proximity*. We need to get close to the people we're hoping to reach if we're going to have any impact on them. I know lots of people who have a strong relationship with Jesus. Their patterns of living are compassionate and authentic, but they never get out where they can rub up next to people who need their influence. They're good looking table ornaments with very little impact.

Rob Harley tells an interesting story about a church in Sydney. Down on the darling Harbour waterfront there was a New Age festival going on: crystals, tarot cards, palm reading, astrology. People were flocking to this very popular event. In previous years, Christians had regularly protested outside the event waving placards saying, "This is evil. It's of the devil. It's not right in a Christian society." But this particular church got an idea. This year, they went inside and became part of the festival, setting up what they called a "Christ Consciousness" booth. They got some of those old, odd-looking "egg chairs" from the 1970s, they wired up a couple of little speakers inside the chairs, and they offered people a free hearing test, a proper, professional hearing test. If someone's hearing came up deficient, church members would offer to pray for them, to have their hearing restored. It turned out to be a hugely popular part of the festival. And people got healed. Some even came to faith. The point is, you can stand outside people's lives, waving placards. Or you can use your imagination and, without compromising your convictions, get involved in their lives. And make a difference. Next week we're going to discuss some practical ways we can naturally move into influence range with our friends, the opportunities for spiritual impact that already exist for each one of us.

Clear Communication

So that leaves one more element in this formula. What does "CC" stand for? Alongside salt, Jesus uses the metaphor of light to describe what his followers should be like: "You are the light of the world" (v 14). Again, it's worth asking: why did Jesus choose this metaphor? What does light do? The most basic answer is that light makes things visible. It helps us see things for what they really are. It's what we mean when we say we want to "shed some light" on an issue. And when you look at how the Bible uses the term "light," the central idea that emerges is that of clearly and attractively presenting God's truth to others. That means a *lifestyle* that points people to the truth about God. Jesus talks in v 16 about our "good deeds." But the distinctive idea in other biblical passages on light seems to be that of clearly articulating with our words the *content of the gospel message*. You see this for example, in 2 Corinthians 4:5-6, where we're told that when the message of Christ was first made clear to us, God "made his light shine in our hearts to give us *the light of the knowledge of the glory of God* in the face of Christ." Do you see the link between light and the conveying of information about the gospel message? So, in this passage, Jesus seems to be saying, "I want you, my followers, to be able to spiritually illuminate others not only by living out my teachings, but by clearly explaining my message of forgiveness and grace." That's the final component of this formula for reaching our friends: CC stands for the *Clear Communication* of the gospel message.

Now I've got a theory. I think some, if not most, of us have got our maths wrong. We say to ourselves, "If I live out my faith in an open and consistent way, the people around me will see my faith and some of it will rub off on them. They'll figure out they need Jesus and put their faith in him." Right? But let's be honest. How often does that work? Just as words without actions are futile, actions without words are devoid of meaning. Jesus said we are to be *both* salt *and* light. So, I'll just come out and ask it. When was the last time you explained the way of salvation to a friend? Could you even do it? In the next few weeks, here and in our small groups, we're going to explore some natural and simple ways to clearly communicate the Gospel message. It's all there in the Bible. God isn't like a boss or teacher who just gives us an assignment and then leaves us to figure out how to do it on our own. He gave us the formula for reaching our friends. Wherever there is high potency, close proximity, clear communication of the gospel, and the Holy Spirit is active, there is an equation that might lead, eventually, to one more lost person finding their way home. "You are the light of the salt of the earth," Jesus said. "You are the light of the world."

He meant *you*.

Questions

1. If God's wants us to arrange our lives so that, spiritually, we have "maximum impact" on those around us, how are you going? How is the church performing? What prevents us from fulfilling our redemptive potential?
2. Why did Jesus use the metaphors of salt and light to describe his followers?
3. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom complained, "We admire wealth equally with them [non-Christians], and even more. We have the same horror of death, the same dread of poverty, the same impatience of disease; we are equally fond of glory and of rule ... How then can they believe?" How could we, today, be more distinctive and "potent" as salt among our non-Christian friends?
4. Read Matthew 5:7-9. Have you had any opportunities lately to show mercy? How could you be more authentic with your feelings, failures, and faith? What could you personally, or this church corporately, do to sacrifice our time, money, or rights for those who need it?
5. Becky Pippert wrote that unless salt gets poured out of the shaker, it remains a mere table ornament. Are you a mere table ornament? How many non-Christian friends do you have that you could invite to a church event?
6. In Romans 10:14 Paul asks, "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" How would you communicate the gospel if you had a one minute window to do so? Split into pairs and take turns doing just that.

Acknowledgement

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