

“SALT AND LIGHT”
Matthew 5:13-16

Bathurst Baptist - Sunday 10/4/2016

Some of you may be familiar with the Peanuts cartoons, by Charles Schulz. In one of his cartoons, Charles has the character, Peppermint Pattie talking to Charlie Brown.

“Guess what, Charlie. The first day of school I got sent to the principal’s office, and it was your fault.”

“My fault? How could it be my fault? Why do you say everything is my fault?”

“You’re my friend, aren’t you?” said Peppermint Pattie. “You should have been a better influence on me!”

Now while Peppermint Pattie was just trying to pass the buck, in a way she was right. We certainly do have an influence on those around us, for good and for bad.

In fact, lots of people are watching us. The story is told of a minister who was making a wooden trellis to support a climbing vine in his garden. As he was pounding away with the hammer, he noticed that a small boy was watching him closely. The preacher just kept working, thinking that eventually the lad would get bored and leave. But he didn’t. Pleased at the thought that his work was being admired, the pastor finally said, “Well, son – trying to pick up some pointers on gardening?” “No,” he replied, “I’m just waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with the hammer!”

People are watching us! What do they see? What do they observe when they look at us Christians? What they see has an influence on them. And it should. You see, Jesus told us that we would definitely have an influence in this world. Listen to what he said in his sermon on the mount.

“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.

The first thing Jesus says here is that we are like salt, and at first reading, it's a little confusing. There's no such thing as "unsalty" salt. If you shake the salt out of your saltshaker, and it's not salty, then someone has played a trick on you, and put white sand in the shaker or something, because salt doesn't go bad. The sodium chloride table salt that you buy at Coles is pure. But the salt we buy today didn't exist back in Jesus' day. Back then they got salt from evaporated sea water, and it was never completely pure – it was almost always contaminated with other elements.

Occasionally, what they gathered to use as a seasoning or to preserve their meat was so impure that it wasn't very salty at all. When that happened, they would gather it up and throw it on their fields as a fertiliser to break down the soil. Sometimes they would throw it out the door to harden the pathway that led to the front porch.

But what Jesus is saying in these verses is that if his followers are going to change the world, then they have to be the real thing – they have to be authentic. They can't be a mixture of all kinds of impurity. We have to be uncompromised, pure and authentic. That's the word to remember with this challenge of Jesus to be the salt of the earth. Jesus is saying, "Be authentic."

Sadly we have to admit it. One thing that has limited the influence of Christians on this world is that many who claim to be followers of Christ aren't authentic. There are a whole lot of people who come to church on a Sunday, but you'd never know it by the way they live their lives from Monday to Saturday. If they have any influence on the world, it isn't one that draws people to Jesus. If anything, an inconsistent lifestyle repels people from the church. The world is looking for something authentic. People want the real deal, and if our Christianity is just a show, then they can get make-believe every night when they watch "Home and Away". Jesus calls us to live out a pure, uncompromised, authentic faith – if we do that, the world will be changed by it.

So how authentic is our faith? Are the people around us drawn to faith by our lives? Do the people who cross our path recognise

that there is a difference in the way we live? In Galatians 5, Paul said that when the Holy Spirit is active in your life, you will be filled with love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. Can the people we work with – our family members – our neighbours – the people we go to school with – can they see those fruits of the Spirit growing in our lives? Are we the real deal, or is there so much impurity mixed in with our faith that it isn't much good for anything?

Now please understand what I'm saying here. The key to being the salt of the earth is being real, not trying to appear perfect. Nobody likes a phony, and if you think you are fooling everybody, the only person you are fooling is yourself. The world can generally smell a fake at fifty paces. If we are trying to make people think that we never struggle, that sin is only a distant memory in our life, then we aren't being authentic. We're just wearing a mask.

In ancient Greece they had great theatrical events, playing in large amphitheatres. They didn't have microphones to make their voices heard, and they didn't have cameras to magnify their images onto big screens, so they invented their own system. They developed big larger than life masks, which made them look like the characters they portrayed. Built into the masks were megaphones to amplify their voices. The actors got on stage, got behind their masks and they became somebody else, someone different than who they really were. The actors were called "hypocrites" – that's where we get the word from. There are a lot of people whose life is just a big act. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 23:25-27.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean."

You see, God wants to change us, but not superficially. God doesn't want to just change the way we look. He wants to change who we are. He wants to clean us up from the very core of our

beings. When we try and put on a mask, we short-circuit His work because we try and appear changed when we're not. Jesus is calling us to influence our world towards godliness. But to do that, we have to be authentic – with a faith in Jesus that changes us from the inside out.

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The second image that Jesus uses to speak of our influence in the world is no less challenging. Jesus compares us to light. Now the image of light is a common one in the New Testament. John wrote about Jesus in John 1:4,5 *“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”* In 1 John 1 we read, *“God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him, yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”* Consistently, throughout the Bible, there is the thought that where God is, there is light. And conversely, where God is not, there is darkness.

Now what Jesus does here in these three verses is to expand the image to include those who follow God. As believers in Christ, we become the light of the world. It's not that we have an ability on our own to bring light to the darkness. He simply means that by being followers of Christ, we gain the ability to reflect His light. That's why the result is praise for Him – He gets the glory through the good deeds that we do through Him.

But the big point of what Jesus is saying here comes in verses 14 and 15. Light exists for a purpose – to illuminate the darkness. You can't hide the light and expect it to be any good. You have to show it.

It seems to me that Jesus is saying there that as light, we need to be available. And being available is just as important as being authentic, if we are going to influence our world for Christ.

There are many who claim that a person's faith is a personal, private thing. I agree that it *is* a personal thing in that each person

must make a decision whether they are going to believe in Jesus or not. But that's not what people generally mean when they make this statement. They usually mean that one's faith should be kept to oneself – not openly shared. And they usually make the statement to avoid sharing what they do or don't believe. But Jesus teaches that a person's faith is to be openly shared and lived before a watching world. It's supposed to shine out for all to see – not so we can proclaim what good people we are – but so others can know that there is a God who loves them, and will act on their behalf. We are to influence others for God.

Jesus is challenging us to make a concerted effort to live in contact with people who need to know Him. When I was a pastor, one of the things I used to miss from my previous days in the corporate world was the daily rubbing shoulders with the average Aussie pagan. My work as a pastor saw to it that most of my time was spent with other believers, and that was OK, but I revelled in the occasional opportunities I got to spend time with unbelievers – particularly when they were in need, and I could bring some salt and light to bear on their particular predicament or situation. That's one of the reasons why I am so thrilled that God has led me into my current sphere of ministry, as a prison chaplain, where I rub shoulders with pagans every day of the week! We need to be more involved with non-Christian people. We need to make the effort to cross paths with those who don't know Jesus and the love and the hope that he offers. When you are blessed enough to live in the light, make sure you don't hide it. Be available enough to reflect it to others who are still living in the darkness. That's the only way you will ever influence them.

Now this sounds all very well and good. To influence our world towards God, Jesus calls us to be authentic, and to be available. Let Him transform us from the inside out, and then let others see that transformation by our good deeds. But when you bring all this together, it starts to get uncomfortable. When we try to bring together the two - authenticity and availability, our tendency is to focus on one or the other.

You see, when you focus on living with an authentic faith, the tendency is to retreat from the world. Many do it by surrounding themselves with a bunch of Christians. They listen to Christian radio stations, read Christian books, develop deep friendships with other Christians. All of those are good things, but if we aren't also

intentional about being available, the result is that our authentic faith doesn't influence the world very much, because it's out of their reach.

The other extreme is availability without authenticity. Some people who claim to follow Christ don't have any trouble being involved in the lives of people who don't know Christ. But the problem is that their lives are indistinguishable from unbelievers. They have the same attitudes and the same actions. They enjoy the same entertainment and maintain the same lifestyle. If you didn't know better, you'd think they were unbelievers too. Their faith doesn't make much of a difference in their life. They've forgotten that Christians are called to be "in the world, but not of it."

So this challenge of Jesus to be an influence in our world is tougher than it appears, isn't it? As I've been speaking, you probably have a pretty good idea about which tendency you lean towards. So what *is* your tendency? Are you more likely to compromise on the authentic faith and become more like the world, or to compromise on availability and withhold your influence from the world? In my experience, most Christians tend to lean towards the authenticity, but away from the availability. But either way we have failed to be the salt and light that Jesus called you to be, which can only really happen when authenticity and availability are working together.

A young boy about nine years old went with his parents to Europe one summer. Part of their tour was spent visiting some of the great old cathedrals of the past. As he visited cathedral after cathedral, the young boy saw the massive stained glass portraits of the disciples and other saints. He was so impressed as he stood in these great empty halls looking through the beautiful stained glass windows. When he got back home, his Sunday School teacher asked him what he liked most about the great churches of Europe. He thought for a moment, and said, "*I loved the sense of awesomeness and the hugeness of who God must be.*" His teacher then asked what was his definition of a saint. As his mind went back to those massive beautiful stained glass windows, he said, "*A saint is a person the light shines through!*"

Is the light of Christ shining through your life to others who need to know Jesus? Or have you been so concerned with being authentic that you have withdrawn from the world completely and

your light is hidden from them under a comfortable bowl of *churchianity*?

Does your life make a difference? To your neighbours – to your friends – to the people who cross your path. Are you being salt and light to a world that is so tasteless, and so dark?

Lord, by Your grace, give every authentic Christ-follower in this room this morning, at least one opportunity this week to be Your salt, and Your light to someone who needs to know You, and the courage to so let our light shine before men, that they might see the difference You make in our lives, and be drawn to the source of all light as a consequence.