

You Are Salt and Light: You Are a Change Agent

Matthew 5:13-16

Dr. Michael Helms

January 7, 2018

Last year a young man talked to me about the difficulty he was having working in an environment filled mostly with non-Christians.

He told me what it was like to be part of conversations that challenged his values and went cross grain with his faith.

He mostly stayed quiet until he was prodded to join in the conversation.

He said that when he spoke up and let it be known why he didn't laugh at certain jokes or things that were said, it set him up to be ridiculed for his Christian values.

I encouraged him and told him that we are called to be salt and light to non-Christians. However, my encouragement didn't land home at first.

He said, "If I am being salt and LIGHT to these people, shouldn't I be a welcomed part of their group? Shouldn't I be someone they enjoy instead of someone that annoys them?"

He said, "Salt makes things taste better, not worse. People want to have salt around."

I must admit, what he said made good sense.

Most Christian have experienced what this young man experienced.

It's one reason a lot of Christians keep their beliefs to themselves. We fly under the radar. We keep religion and everything about Jesus out of the workplace, out of school, off the ball field, and away from where we volunteer or hang out with friends.

But if we do that, can we be salt and light to others as Jesus said we should be?

What exactly did Jesus mean by that anyway? How are we salt and light to others?

Jesus chose his metaphors carefully. These were good ones for his day and they are still good ones for ours.

One thing that salt and light have in common is that they are both change agents. We know that as soon as we taste food that's been salted or food that has no salt.

We know the difference between a dark room and one that has the lights on.

Jesus wants us to have a positive impact on our world. Jesus believes that we can change the environment we are in because of our association with him. He wants us to change it for the better, the way salt and light change things for the better.

Salt doesn't always make people comfortable, though. Have you ever gotten salt in a wound? It burns, doesn't it?

Sometimes when we speak truth, it doesn't set well with people who don't want to hear it, even when we speak it in love. The truth can burn. When it does, people are going to become uncomfortable, even angry. They may lash out at the messenger.

God wants us to be change agents, but have you noticed that as a rule people resist change? If we are messengers of change, they will resist us.

So we need to be as "wise as serpents and gentle as doves," as Jesus once said.

There isn't anything that has a greater change effect on darkness than light. In the presence of light, darkness cannot compete. It has no chance of existing. It has to run and hide and find a corner where light cannot reach it to exist.

Not only does light drive darkness away, but light helps create the oxygen that we breathe. Green plants take light and use it to transform water, carbon dioxide, and minerals into oxygen and organic compounds. It's not wrong to say that light gives us breath.

As a change agent, light has the power to purify water. The right kind of light can kill germs and bacteria in water, making it safe to drink.

People wouldn't have known anything about light killing germs or helping release oxygen into the air in Jesus' day, but they knew that plants grew better in the sun than in the shade. They knew that people's fears of the unknown dissipated when the sun rose.

They knew that light gave off heat and without heat people got cold and needed to warm themselves by a fire. They knew that when they were traveling at night they could see a light on a hill from miles away.

They knew that when you went into a dark room you could light up the entire room if you put a lamp on a lampstand. How foolish it would be to light a lamp and then cover it up.

Jesus wanted his followers to know that they could have this kind of effect on other people if they loved people with God's love.

But just as salt can burn if it gets in a wound, light can blind us if it's too strong and gets in our eyes. If light is concentrated in a laser and is not controlled, it can do more damage than good.

I have read articles recently that have suggested high profile evangelicals have done more damage to the Christian cause than good as they have failed to acknowledge moral

shortcomings, and instead they have maintained arrogant, unrepentant spirits. People have tended to judge the rest of us by their standards.

We have all been around people that have tried to make changes in the wrong way. Instead of being helpful, they could not see the harm they were doing.

Let me ask you a few questions. What do you respond best to: an explanation of truth or a demonstration of truth? Do you respond best to an explanation of love or a demonstration of love? Do you respond best to someone who has all the answers or someone who tries to live by example?

To be salt and light to others requires that we speak truth but people respond better when we live and demonstrate it. It is important to speak love but it's much more effective when we live it.

I can tell you about a time when God's love lit up a dark place in my life but that's not nearly as powerful as my showing God's love to someone that is going through a dark time in his or her life.

I can tell someone about a time when God made my life better but that's not as powerful as being a part of making someone's life better because I care about him or her. This is how we are salt in others' lives.

To win people to Jesus, it takes time for them to hear truth AND experience it. Both are important.

If we just speak truth, without demonstrating it, or talk about love without showing it, it can turn people away. It can make people angry and resentful and cause them to see us as Bible-thumping know-it-alls who care little for them and don't want to understand them or their situation.

That is the reason Jesus' brother James admonishes us to back up our faith with deeds. It's not enough to say to someone, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," because if it does "nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" James says that "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:16-17)

It is important for us to speak truth, but if we only speak truth and never show love, that will poison relationships.

It's like getting the Chlorine without the sodium. It takes both to make salt. However, one without the other is poison.

It's like shining light in someone's eyes instead of at the places where the light is needed most. It's like pouring salt in a wound instead of using it where it's most needed.

On the other hand, love without truth can seem foolish, even blind.

People will eventually take advantage of our good will and never understand our motivation for our actions if we show love but we never speak a word of truth.

Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the gospel--and sometimes use words.”

While he emphasized action over words, words are still important. Otherwise, Jesus would not have used parables or taught about the Kingdom of God after he performed miracles or when questioned by the Pharisees.

Eventually, we need to make a verbal witness of why we seek to act lovingly.

Truth can be communicated without words, but words can also be helpful.

What is needed is a combination in good balance. We need to combine the spoken truth with love in action. That is when we become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. That is when we become change agents.

(<http://www.gracetucsonwels.com/clientimages/36669/documents/sermons/sermon%20msw%2002%2009%2014.pdf>)

I think my friend was doing fine in his new relationship with his co-workers. I could feel his struggle. But given time, he will have opportunities to speak truth and show love in sacrificial ways that will surprise his coworkers and reflect the nature of Christ.

If you speak truth and your actions consistently back up what you say, people will notice. You will be salt. You will be light. You will be a change agent, empowered by Christ.

It is true: sometimes we speak the truth and the truth burns. Sometimes the truth offends.

While this is sometimes unavoidable, sometimes it isn't, but when it isn't, we should not take any joy in it. Our humility needs to show.

As change agents, we are looking for the best and most productive ways to help others develop a relationship with Jesus.

One of the best ways is to let others see Jesus in us. Let them see a consistency in our attitude, in our stewardship, in our language, in our family life, and in the way we conduct our business.

In this way, when we do speak truth, they realize that it comes from someone that is living it.

When there is no integrity in the way we live, our words of wisdom for others will be cast aside like a burned out light bulb.

Instead, be the light. You be the salt.

Do this day in and day out by the way that you live so that when you speak of spiritual things, you have integrity. That way, the truth of God's ways and His love has a chance to land in the hearts of those who hear it.

Otherwise, your words will be thrown out like salt that has lost its saltiness. Your words will be as lost as if you are shining your light into the sun.

As we enter in to a New Year, think about those people that are in your circle of influence. Who are those people that you have an opportunity to be salt and light to?

Are you fulfilling that role of a Christian who is supposed to be salt and light as God has commanded in the Sermon on the Mount?

Right now, ask God to help your words and your actions match up so that you can be salt and light to people in your circle of influence.

Ask God for courage to speak when necessary, for integrity to live a life that reflects the life of a Christian, and the ability to have influence on those around you who need to know that God loves them.

That has to start with their knowing that you love them because you are a disciple of Jesus.

© Copyright 2018 by John Michael Helms