



A Formula for Impacting Your World

Matthew 5:13-16

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. Unfortunately, this kind of thing happens all the time.[1]

- Your boss sets a sky-high quota and lets you know in no uncertain terms that he expects you to meet it. But how you get it all done is your problem.
- Or your college professor barks out more and more assignments as the books and homework pile up. Read this, write that, take the exam. And the professor seems unconcerned that you have four other classes with equally high demands.

Even in church we can feel bombarded with expectations to have strong marriages, obedient children, balanced budgets, ethical businesses, effective prayer lives, and meaningful relationships. But while the "ought to" comes through loudly and clearly, the "how to" often remains distant and muffled, if it's heard at all.

One place where this is especially true is in the challenge to have an evangelistic impact on your world. "People are lost," we preachers exclaim. "They're headed for hell, God wants to reach them, so you'd better get out there and bring them to Christ!"

How can you argue with that? It's biblical, it true, and it makes sense. But maybe you're saying, "Could somebody elaborate on that technical term 'get out there'? How do I get started? What should I do? Who'll help me?"

A DIVINE PLAN

Thank God He didn't leave us in such a state of confusion. There's an old saying, "What God expects, He enables." Not only does He tell us that this world of wayward people matters to Him, but He also sees to it that we have the information we need to start us on the path of effectively reaching them.

Jesus talked about His plan for doing this a long time ago when He sat with His followers on the side of a hill near Capernaum. From it, today we are going to put together a *Biblical Formula for Impacting Our World*.

MATTHEW 5:13-16

It was in the middle of the greatest sermon in history, the Sermon on the Mount, that Jesus said these famous words: "*You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world.*" He wanted all of His followers to see themselves as salt and light in how they lived out their lives in the world.

I. SALT

Let's look at the first one. Why would Jesus use a metaphor like salt? What does salt do? These days, it makes us nervous because it can lead to high blood pressure, so we feel guilty every time we reach for the shaker, but put that aside for now. Let's look across the spans of time and think about the primary uses of salt in Jesus' day.

1. The first thing is that salt **makes us thirsty**. That's why bars serve salty pretzels and peanuts free of charge, to get people to drink more. Or so I'm told!
2. Salt does something else, too: it **spices things up**. When we eat something that tastes a little bland we reflexively reach for the salt in order to enhance the flavor.
3. And **salt preserves**. We don't use it for this purpose much anymore, but before the days of the refrigeration, salt was widely used to prevent foods

from spoiling. Certain meats could be preserved for long periods of time if they were carefully packed in salt.

So salt stimulates thirst, it adds excitement to the taste of things, and it holds back decay. Which leads us to the big question: Which of these did Jesus have in mind when He looked at His followers and said, "*You are the salt of the earth*"?

The Biblically-researched short answer is, we don't know! If you read the scholars on this question, they'll hold the three cards and say, "Pick a card, any card. Or all three cards, if you'd like."

- It could be that Jesus meant for salt to symbolize the idea of creating thirst. When Christians are in tune with the Holy Spirit, and when they live in their world with a sense of purpose, and with peace and joy, this often creates a spiritual thirst in the people around them. Maybe you are here today because....
- When Christians live out their faith contagiously, they put a little zing into life. They wake people up with their challenges and they overturn a few applecarts here and there. So yes, they put some spice into the lives of those around them.
- What's more, when believers are living Christ-honoring lives they preserve or hold back the moral decay in society. This has been true through the centuries. As Christians honor God, He uses them to stem the tidal wave of evil that's threatening to sweep the land.

So it may be that all three might be what Jesus had in mind when He used the word "salt."

But I think the text points to something else. Upon further reflection you find two MORE reasons Jesus chose the salt metaphor.

First, in order for salt to have the greatest possible impact, it must be **potent** enough to have an effect. Notice how Jesus introduces the salt metaphor in v. 13, **But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?** It is "potency" that Jesus has in mind. Jesus said that salt that is without savor and of inferior quality is worthless. It has lost its power. It won't create much thirst, won't add much spice, won't retard much decay.

And **second**, for any impact to take place, salt has to **get close** to whatever it's supposed to affect.

Highly flavored, industrial-strength potency salt is great, but it can't produce any results unless it touches something. As Becky Pippert wrote many years ago, unless salt gets poured out of the shaker, it remains a mere table ornament.

So Jesus may have chosen the salt metaphor because salt requires both high potency and close proximity to do its thing.

We all know math. We may not like math, but we know it. So today, as we go through this passage, we are going to construct a mathematical formula that will result in *Maximum Impact* in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. We may find that we need to concentrate on one or more of the three factors that equal *Maximum Impact*. If we don't feel effective, it is most likely due to our being deficient in one or more of these areas.

So far Jesus has defined two of the factors.

HP equals High Potency

CP equals Close Proximity

That's exactly what we need as Christians if we're going to influence people who are outside the family of God. We must have high potency, which means a strong enough concentration of Christ's influence in our lives that His power and presence will be undeniable to others. And we've got to have plenty of proximity. We need to get close to people we're hoping to reach in order to allow His power to have its intended effect.

A POTENT EXAMPLE

Bill Hybels gives a powerful example of the importance of potency in his book:

A few years ago my wife and I spent a day with Billy and Ruth Graham at their mountaintop home in North Carolina. In the evening I could tell Billy was starting to get tired, so I told him we were going to head back to our hotel. But to my surprise he handed me his Bible and said, "Bill, before you go, feed me from God's Word."

I thought to myself, this seasoned leader is obviously not a baby Christian. And there's no savor problem here, either! In addition, he has communicated the gospel message to more people than anyone else in history. Yet here he was saying to me, in effect, "I still need and love to be fed from God's Word."

This experience helped me understand why Billy Graham has maintained such a high-potency factor for so long. He continually takes steps to heighten his saltiness. Nothing that happened during our time together lingered with me more than that did. I left, hoping that my savor factor will be sky high when I'm that age.

I would like to be dangerous when I'm in my later years—wouldn't you?

There aren't many Billy Grahams around, but we can all take steps to raise our understanding of what it takes to have high potency. Undoubtedly, each of us has room to grow in our connectedness to God so as to become stronger salt.

II. LIGHT

Well, we've looked at *salt*, but it was just one of two metaphors Jesus used in describing what His followers should be like. The other was *light*. He said in Matthew 5:14, "*You are the light of the world.*" It is again appropriate to ask what did Jesus mean by light? What does light do?

The most basic answer is that **it makes things visible** and helps us see them for what they really are. It's what we mean when we say we want to "shed some light" on an issue.

And when we look into the biblical use of the term "light," the central idea that emerges is that of clearly and attractively presenting God's truth to others, illuminating it in order to show it for what it really is.

This can be seen in other Bible passages that refer to light. For example, in **2 Corinthians 4:6**, we're told that when the message of Christ was first clarified 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?

Similarly, in the Matthew passage, Jesus seems to be saying He wants His followers to be able to spiritually illuminate others not only by *living out* His teachings, and being in close proximity to those who need it, but also by explaining His message of forgiveness and grace with precision and accuracy. That's what it is to be light.

So just as the salt illustration gave us the first two components of our formula, HP (high potency) + CP (close proximity), so now the light metaphor

provides the final component of our formula for having maximum impact on others. It is CC, which stands for Clear Communication of the gospel message.

For light to have its intended effect, Jesus says in Matthew 5:15-16, it must not be covered up or obscured in any way. And in order for us to have the powerful influence God desires, we must know the gospel message cold and be ready to communicate it concisely and clearly.

This implies that we'll have to do some extra work to learn how to help people understand God's nature, their sinfulness, Christ's payment, and the step each of us must take to receive the forgiveness and new life He offers. To declare and defend the major tenets of the gospel with straightforward simplicity. We need to be ready

Without this, people may doubt that they could ever experience the kind of transformed life they see in us.

That's why starting in about a month on Wednesdays we will have a six-week workshop called "Becoming a Contagious Christian." (one more class) You should come, unless you feel you already excel in this area.

Important!

So.... Can I just come out and say it? There are far too many Christians who have been anesthetized into thinking that if they simply live out their faith in an open and consistent fashion, the people around them will see it, want it, and somehow figure out how to get it for themselves.

But let's be honest: that almost never happens.

While it's a prerequisite to live a salty Christian life—to be highly potent and in relationship with others—that alone is not enough. God forbid that we stop there, because people end up in hell on that plan. It's imperative that we also put the message into clear language our friends can understand and act upon.

Paul asks in **Romans 10:14**, (read it together) "*How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*" Jesus said we should not only

be salt, but also light: clearly communicating His message of grace.

If we're both, then people we care about to do what He says in Matthew 5:16. After they've had an opportunity to "*see your good deeds*" and understand the central gospel message, they'll be ready to make a decision to follow Christ and meaningfully "*praise your Father in heaven*."

III. FUNNY MATH

Putting it all together, we get:

$$\text{HP} + \text{CP (salt)} + \text{CC (light)} = \text{MI}$$

So let's pause to ask the big question: does this equation accurately describe what Jesus is saying? (what He wants us to be)

Take a look at it one more time while you think about this important question:

If true, then does this equation accurately describe the current condition of your own life?

High potency + Close proximity + Clear communication
=Maximum impact

I know people for whom this is an accurate description. These people inspire and challenge me.

1. But many other Christians are *flirting with funny arithmetic*. They're trying to get that "new math" to work. They say, "I'm going to figure out a way to make *high potency* and *low proximity* add up to maximum impact." But they can't succeed, because they remain isolated from the very people they need to touch.

That, unfortunately, is a fairly good description of a lot of us who call ourselves Christians. Oh, we may have a lot of potency in our own relationship with Christ. But we never get out where we can rub up next to people who need our influence. Like fancy salt shakers, we're good-looking table ornaments, but we have low impact.

2. Others say, "I'll have all the *proximity* you can imagine. I'll run with those crowds so much that I'll become indistinguishable! And then I'll have maximum impact." No you won't—not until you' have distinctiveness, potency, and savor.

3. Many more people try to conclude the matter by saying, "Okay, I'll get my savor factor up high by living a consistent Christian life, and then I'll exert the needed efforts to get into influence-range with the people I'd like to reach. *But please don't ask me to actually say anything!* I'll just live out my faith in front of them and maybe some of it will begin to rub off."

As time will prove, however, that's only wishful thinking. Just as *words without actions* are futile, *actions without words* are devoid of meaning and content. Like I said before, *people end up in hell because of that plan*.

Can you see why Jesus emphasized that we need to be both salt and light? It's critical that we have a high savor factor and a readiness to articulate the message of Christ.

CONCLUSION

Given that our goal is to have the highest spiritual influence possible, it's important that we explore each ingredient in the equation more fully. That's what we'll do in the weeks ahead.

Today I want to ask you to be honest before God. How's your math? Is your life adding up, or is there an areas or two in the equation that you really need to work on?

If so, will you commit it to God today?

Will you tell him that in the next few weeks you will be open to his instruction and guidance so that you can become a more contagious Christian?

[1] This message is almost entirely based on Chapter 3 of the book, "Becoming a Contagious Christian" by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg.