

THE INFLUENTIAL BELIEVER

Today's Text: Matt. 5: 13-16

Extracts:

[Jesus taught them, saying] ***“You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”*** [Matt. 5: 13-16].

Moisei Baraniuc is a 17-year-old senior at Todd Beamer High School in Federal Way, Washington State, USA.¹ A few years ago, he immigrated with his parents to America from Ukraine with only \$300 in their possession. He works 15 hours a week as a grocery bagger in the Federal Way supermarket where he is paid the minimum wage, just enough to pay for gas and other expenses. At work, he is popularly called Moses. He also teaches 10-year olds in Sunday school at First Ukrainian Baptist Church in the Federal Way area. Recently, while at work, he went to wash his hands in the bathroom where he saw a brown canvas money bag on the floor. He opened it and found the sum of \$10,000. He immediately turned it over to his boss who called 911 to report the find. It turned out that the money represented the life savings of a Vancouver man who had accidentally left the bag in the men's room where it was found. He came to claim his money and promised to send Moisei “a little reward.” Moisei's employers also expressed their “overwhelming sense of pride for Moses for doing the right thing.”

He could have kept the money without being found out. That could have eased his and his parents' financial lack. Asked why he turned in the money, Moisei said that his father had taught him, “If you take what doesn't belong to you, it will catch up with you.” More importantly, he added, “I can't be teaching little kids not to do it if I'm doing it.” Moses chose to defend his faith. He chose to be the pride of his upbringing and a positive example of his faith to the world around him. He is an influential believer.

Everyday, each of us is placed in a position to showcase our faith, to be a good ambassador of Christ. What are you doing with your chance? Let us get some help from this week's study to answer that question.

¹ Story based on Steve Maynard, “Teen finds \$10,000 at work; turns it in,” *The Olympian.com*. <http://www.theolympian.com/northwest/story/677305-p2.html> , November 27, 2008.

1. Introduction: Is every Christian a believer?

Ordinarily, a Christian is a follower of Christ. However, the term has come to be equated with everyone who has received water baptism. But we know from the words of Jesus that there is a difference between a professing Christian and a practising Christian because “you will know them by their fruits” not by their ability to flaunt their spiritual gifts [Matt. 7: 15-20; Gal. 5: 22-24]. We shall use the term, ‘believer,’ to refer to practising Christians, that is, those who demonstrate their faith in Jesus and His Father in *everything they do*.

2. Jesus uses salt and light as similitudes

There is the story of a young British colonial officer in Africa in the 1950’s who believed in consultation and dialogue to resolve differences between the natives and the colonial administration. One day, he held a meeting with a group of village elders. In concluding his opening remarks, he said, “I have called for this meeting because I want to hear from the horse’s mouth.” To his surprise, the elders hissed and left one by one. He asked the interpreter what he had done wrong. The poorly educated man replied, “You called them horses and they felt insulted!”

When you say that somebody or something is like somebody or something else, it is called a similitude or a figure of speech. However, if your listener does not understand it, it can be misleading. To the young British officer, a horse’s mouth means an authentic or reliable source. But to the African elders who were the repository of the wisdom of their ancestors, it was insulting for them to be likened to an animal like the horse! The lesson of that story is that you have to be careful to choose your figures of speech.

In this week’s text, Jesus continues His teachings, famously referred to as the ‘Sermon on the Mount.’ Specifically, He addresses Christian conduct in an evil world using the similitudes of salt and light which His listeners could easily understand. Jesus was actually addressing His teachings to believers that could influence the world for good, and you have the chance today to be one of them!

a) *The believer as the salt of the earth*

Jesus taught, “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing, but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” [Matt. 5: 13].

Salt has several uses. For example, salt seasons or flavours food or it can be used as a food preservative. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus concentrated on the seasoning value of salt. His listeners were familiar with it because, under the Law of Moses, God commanded, “Every

offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt” [Lev. 2: 13]. For salt to be able to season other foods, it must itself have flavour. The gospel of Mark uses ‘strength’ in place of flavour or seasoning [Mk 9: 50- KJV]. If salt does not have flavour or strength, then it is worthless. It is thrown away and trampled underfoot by people. Jesus adds, “Have salt in yourselves and have peace with one another” [Mk 9: 50].

How do believers become the salt of the earth? It is through the positive impact they make on those around them. In law, it is recognized that you cannot give what you do not have [*Nemodat quod non habet*]. Jesus told His disciples, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; *for without Me you can do nothing*” [Jn 15: 5]. Therefore, the believer’s seasoning comes from being firmly anchored to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith [Heb. 12: 2].

Take the influence of Barnabas and Saul in the church at Antioch. Barnabas “was a good man, *full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*. And a great many people were added to the Lord.” That was not enough for him. He went to Tarsus to look for Saul who had himself seen the light of Christ on his way to Damascus [Acts 9: 1-9]. He brought him to Antioch where both of them spent a whole year, “assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And *the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch*” [Acts 11: 19-26]. Barnabas and Saul (along with the apostles and other disciples) were thus the salt of the earth not only in Antioch but in the whole of the then Roman Empire.

b) *The believer as the light of the world*

Jesus also taught His listeners, “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden... (so) let your light so shine before men, *that they may see your good works* and glorify your Father in heaven” [Matt. 5: 14, 16]. People watch what we do, whether good or bad. If they regard us as their role models, they will imitate us. Therefore, we have to be careful what light we show to others. That was why Paul told the church of the Philippians, “The things which you *learned* and *received* and *heard* and *saw* in me, *these do*, and the God of peace will be with you” [Phil. 4: 9]. I doubt if he would recommend himself that way if he lived in spiritual darkness!

Even though we have eyes, we cannot see with them unless there is light. In like manner, many people may have access to the word of God (such as owning and reading the Bible) but unless their eyes are opened, they may not be able to see the hidden treasures therein. God can use the believer to provide such light to others. For example, when the Ethiopian eunuch, the

treasurer to Candace queen of the Ethiopians, was struggling with understanding Isaiah Chapter 53, the Spirit of God led to him Philip (one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles). Philip used Scripture to show him that the said passage referred to Jesus the Messiah. The Ethiopian believed and was baptized, and “he went on his way rejoicing” [Acts 8:26-40]. You can be sure that that was how the Christian church spread to Ethiopia.

Clearly, the believer’s light comes from another source. The Psalmist says of the Lord, “For with You is the fountain of life; *in Your light we see light*” [Ps. 36: 9]. Speaking of the Word of God who was with God in the beginning, John wrote “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. . . . That was the true Light *which gives light to every man coming into the world.*” That Word was made flesh and dwelt among men as Jesus the Christ [Jn 1: 1, 4, 9, 14]. That is why Jesus has said, “I am the light of the world. *He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life*” [Jn 8: 12]. The believer has light because s(he) has Christ.

In summary, Jesus has pointed us to the building blocks of our influence as believers. Salt symbolizes who you are, how much you are anchored on Christ. Light represents what you show, how much of the fruits of the Holy Spirit others see in you. The influence you wield depends on how much of both you possess.

3. Types of believers

Based on the forgoing analysis, we can identify different influence levels, depending on the type of believer that you are. Let us take a few examples:

a) *The false believer*

Some believers used to be firebrands. Along the way, they backslid by, for example, using their spiritual gifts to make money or commit sexual immorality with vulnerable women, especially those desperately looking for the fruit of the womb. When such people refuse to repent but misread signs and wonders as evidence of God’s presence with them, they stand the chance of being salt without flavour. They have no light of God to show. Sooner than later, their falsehood will show. Ultimately, they lose followers and influence.

Take, for example, the greed of Gehazi, the servant of the prophet Elisha [2 Kgs 5: 20-27]. Through the prophet, God had healed a Syrian general, Naaman, of leprosy. Despite Naaman’s insistence, the prophet refused to take any gifts. So, the general from an idol-worshipping nation said to Elisha, “Then, if not, please let your servant be given two mule-loads of earth; *for your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering or sacrifices to other gods, but to the Lord*” [v. 17]. The general thus gave his

life to the true God because Elisha had seasoned his faith with a demonstration of God's healing powers. But his greedy servant, Gehazi, ran after the general and took from him what the prophet had refused. Gehazi told a lie that his master had sent him back to collect the gifts because visitors had come after the general had left! Naaman gladly gave him some gifts. What did that do? The general had paid for his medical treatment, so to speak. Therefore, he did not need to use the earth he had taken from Israel to build a place of worship in Syria. Prophet Elisha's light that was shining on Naaman had been dimmed because Gehazi's salt had lost its flavour. The useless salt was only good to be trampled underfoot. God transferred Naaman's leprosy to Gehazi and his descendants!

b) *The hypocrite*

Some people thrive on showmanship. They know how to impress the observer of their conduct because they understand human criteria for evaluating performance (outward show). Invariably, they focus on strict adherence to rituals, rules and regulations. For example, such people will be punctual to work even when they come to gossip and do little work. They will not miss any church service even when their minds wander elsewhere during prayers. They insist on upholding the letters of the Ten Commandments and denominational doctrines but are silent on the spirit behind them. Such believers are hypocrites.

The scribes and Pharisees were among the most critical of Jesus while He was on earth. They were most anxious to uphold the Law of Moses. Yet, they were not good examples of righteousness. Once, while speaking with multitudes and His disciples, Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. Therefore, whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, *but do not do according to their works; for they say and do not do*" [Matt. 23: 1-3]. Their salt had no flavour; their light was dim.

c) *The underdeveloped believer*

Some people have the anointing and do exploits for Christ on Sundays or within familiar circles, such as church events. However, the moment they are out in unfamiliar territory, such as in the office or school, they develop cold feet. For example, the same people who spend a few minutes praying over food at home can hardly bless their meals before eating in restaurants! The same people who will not let their children watch even R-rated movies on home television will vicariously enjoy immoral jokes and shows outside. In the name of being 'politically correct,' many Christians take public positions that negate their core beliefs and values. Such believers can be regarded as underdeveloped. Their salt has no seasoning outside and they are not showing any light to those living in darkness.

Sometimes, the underdevelopment shows as inability to help yourself or others in times of distress. For example, some people think their pastors owe them their comfort or salvation. When they or their family members need prayers, they call the pastor. When the church needs their talents (such as singing in the choir, cleaning the toilets, teaching in Sunday school), they expect others to volunteer! In the end, their talents remain underutilized and underdeveloped.

d) *The influential believer*

By the time you interact with some people a few times, you do not need to ask questions about their faith in Jesus. They are helpful and selfless. They radiate confidence, no matter the odds they face. We are not talking of optimism. An optimist can hope in hopelessness. The person of faith pins his or her hope in Christ, no matter the odds. Therefore, their confidence is anchored on certainty. It is only such people that can influence others for Christ.

Take the example of Peter and John when they were brought before the Jewish council for daring to use the name of and preach about Jesus. When the people “saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled and they realized that they had been with Jesus” [Acts 4: 13]. Their salt was seasoned by Christ, not by their own efforts since they were uneducated! Their light shone through their boldness and they could not be silenced. They were influential believers.

4. Conclusion: You too can be influential!

God has given you enormous talents and opportunities to change the world around you for good. Right now, you may know some innocent friends or relatives who have left the church or job on account of sexual harassment. You may be familiar with some people who are benefitting from the corrupt practices of some people who are key executives or employees of enterprises or government departments. You may know some marriages that have been ruined or are in distress because of interference from close relatives, friends or pastors. The environment of your family, church, school or office may have been polluted through some members’ tongues or conduct. In such or similar circumstances, what have you done to shine the light of Christ on the affected people for God’s glory? If you have not, you may need to replace your salt and kindle a new light.

Be an influential believer.