

Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship. (Acts 20:17-38)

Jumping Back In!

- A. It’s been a bit since we’ve been in the book of Acts, so let me at least remind you where we are:
1. Paul has sensed from the Spirit now that it’s time for him to begin wrapping up his third missionary journey and head back to Jerusalem.
 2. And it’s been revealed to him that he’s not coming back to Asia or these other provinces where he’s been laboring and planting churches for however many years. This is it.
 - a. He’s going to Jerusalem. He knows suffering and imprisonment await him there.
 - b. And then he hopes somehow to make it on to Rome.

- i. But he's not coming back.
- B. And so what he's doing here is gathering the leaders, the elders, the pastors, the overseers of one of the more prominent churches he planted during his time—the church in Ephesus.
 - 1. And he's saying goodbye to them.
 - 2. But more than that, he's trying to help set them up for success when he's gone. He wants them to be healthy, thriving leaders, shepherding a healthy, thriving church.
 - a. So what comes of this, then, is we get a really good sense from him what it looks like to be a healthy Christian leader.
- C. There are all these characteristics that just come tumbling out.
 - 1. And I want to make sure we catch each one of them and consider them, as we make our way through his words here bit-by-bit, verse-by-verse.
 - 2. I think we're going to spend four weeks when it's all said and done, because there's just so much here!

Christian "Influencer"?

- A. Before we proceed though, I should say something about the title of this sermon: "Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer (Part 1)."
 - 1. Now, why do I choose word "influencer" here? "I thought we're talking about elders and pastors? Why are you talking about influencers?"
- B. Well, first, just to be clear, I'm not talking about social media influencers here, obviously. I'm referring to those who are called by God to influence others for Jesus in some way.
- C. And, second, I went with this word rather than "elder" or something because I didn't want the great majority of you who are not elders or official leaders in this room thinking right out of the gate: "Well, I guess this doesn't apply to me" . . . because it does!
 - 1. I don't want you tuning out on this. This isn't just for the leaders. It's for every one of us.
 - 2. It may be especially for the leaders. But it isn't only for them.
- D. In the Scriptures, we see it: Elders, church leaders, they're simply called to lead the way in what every Christian is called to be and do in many ways. They set the pace, but everyone's got to run.
 - 1. Have you ever read the elder qualifications Paul gives us in [1 Tim.](#) and [Titus](#)? It's largely just character stuff—character stuff that every Christian is called to have.
 - a. Just to give you one example, it's not like elders need to be "hospitable" (as he says in [1 Tim. 3:2](#) and [Titus 1:8](#)) but the rest of the church can be closed off and cliquish and inhospitable.

- b. No! The elders may be those guys who are supposed to lead the way in that, set the pace for it. But everyone's called to it.
- E. Beyond this, I wonder if you realize: If you are a follower of Jesus you are called to be a leader of somebody—might be your kids, might be your spouse, might be some newer believer in the church, might be someone in your workplace, or someone who doesn't even know Jesus. But, again, if you are a follower of Jesus you are called to be a leader of somebody.
 - 1. That's what the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel is all about.
 - a. We are all called to be disciples of Jesus making disciples of Jesus. There's a replicative element woven into every Christian's DNA.
 - i. You might not be an official "leader", but, regardless, you are still called to lead, to influence others for Jesus.
- F. And here is how you do it! In [Acts 20](#) Paul gives us the critical characteristics of a Christian influencer!
 - 1. Today, we'll only make it through the first five verses, and I'll give you the first six of these characteristics.
 - 2. Let me share them with you up front: (1) They Make Time for People; (2) They Lead with Their Lives; (3) They Serve the Lord (Alone!); (4) They Come in Humility and Weakness; (5) They Share the Hard Truth; and (6) They Do It All in Love.
 - a. Let's take those one at a time now!

Characteristic #1: They Make Time for People

Learning from Paul's Example

- A. This first one's a bit obvious, isn't it? Of course you can't influence people if you're not making time to be with them.
 - 1. We learn this particularly from Paul's example here. I'm just in the first verse of our text, [v. 17](#): "Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him."
 - a. What's he doing? He's making time for them.
- B. Let me remind you, he's in a bit of a rush. In the verse just prior we read how he had to sail past Ephesus because "[he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost](#)" (v. 16).
 - 1. So he's got a deadline. He's in a time crunch. He had to sail past Ephesus.
 - 2. But still he couldn't bear to not connect with them, at the very least with the elders of the church there. So he sends to have them come quickly to him there in Miletus.

- a. Even though he's in a hurry, even though he has a lot on his mind, clearly . . . still he's making time for them.
- C. And this wasn't just a one-off for Paul. This seems to have been a way of life.
- 1. That's why he says down in v. 18: "I lived among you . . ." "I didn't just hit and run. I made time. I shared my life with you."
 - 2. Or he says later down in v. 20 that he ministered to them both "in public and from house to house . . ."
 - 3. And then, finally, listen to how he sums up his ministry with them there in Ephesus down in v. 31. He says he was with them "for three years," never ceasing to minister to them, whether it was "night or day."
 - a. "It doesn't matter the time. It doesn't matter the place. It doesn't matter how busy or burdened I am with other things. I'm going to make space for you."

Walking in the Way of Jesus

- A. And, of course, Paul is simply channeling Jesus in all of this, isn't he? That's where he's learned it. It's the Spirit of Christ that's animating this sort of behavior.
- 1. In fact, as we'll see, every characteristic we will look at through these weeks finds its perfect representation in the life and ministry of our Lord.
 - a. He's the quintessential Christian influencer. He's the one we're following after. He's the one we're reflecting in all this.
- B. It's interesting, for Paul, the whole trajectory of his life here is literally reflecting Jesus' story, isn't it? There's clear parallelism.
- 1. The last days of Jesus' life were spent doing what, do you remember? Traveling to Jerusalem, where he knew he would suffering and death were awaiting him.
 - 2. So Paul is literally walking in his Savior's steps here. Take up your cross and follow me, that's what Paul is doing.
 - a. The life of the disciple will track and trace the life of the Savior.
- C. But as Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem to die—even though he has all this other stuff going on, heavy on his heart—one of the most striking things about it all is this: he still makes time for other people.
- 1. When suffering comes for you and I, a lot of times we just go blind to everyone else around us. "I've got too much going on myself, I can't worry about you."
 - 2. But not Jesus.
- D. If I could just give you one of the more stunning examples. Do you remember what happens when Jesus is there in Gethsemane and the soldiers come to tie him up and all this?

1. Peter pulls out his sword, thinking he'll defend his Lord, and he cuts the ear right off of the servant of the high priest.
 2. How does Jesus respond? Well, first he tells Peter to put the sword away. But then what does he do? He heals the guy's ear.
 3. What a moment that must have been, right? He makes time to help the very ones who had come to hurt him. He cares about this guy. He connects with this guy. You've got to think this servant later comes to faith, right? "Who is this man? He's being hounded and harassed, he's stressed to the max with his own personal stuff, and yet he made time to care for me—even his enemy?" It's crazy.
- E. That's where Paul gets it. That's where we've got to get it.
1. That's who Jesus is for us.
 2. That's who he wants us to be for others—making time.
- F. So who is God calling you to make time for? You can't even begin to influence another for Jesus if you don't begin here.

Characteristic #2: They Lead with Their Lives

- A. I'm getting this from what he says there in v. 18 in particular: "And when they came to him, he said to them: 'You yourselves know how I lived among you . . .'"
1. Emphasis on the word "how." It's a word indicating the manner, the way in which he lived, his lifestyle.
 2. And he's saying: "You know how I lived. You saw it."
 - a. And if you were paying attention to the full text as we read it earlier, you probably noticed how often Paul would then go on to refer to his manner of life, the way he lived among them, as an example to them of how they ought to now live as well—even in, especially in, his absence.
- B. In other words, he didn't just lead them with his lips, he led them with his life.
1. You shouldn't just hear the gospel from my mouth.
 2. You should also see the gospel in "how I live among you."
 - a. The truth of it, the beauty of it, the power of it is on display.
- C. Think about this with Jesus, he didn't just come preaching the kingdom, he came manifesting the kingdom.
1. He didn't just say: "God loves you."
 2. He showed people this love by embracing them, serving them, healing them, casting out demons, all of that!

D. If I could just confess: Sometimes I'm prone to lean way too heavy on my words when attempting to influence others.

1. I think I can persuade with my mouth. I'm a preacher after all. I'm always talking.
2. God's Word is powerful, yes that's true. But sometimes the most powerful thing is the example you set.

a. You're not just telling them the Word. You're showing them a life changed by the Word.

E. I was reminded of this when I was talking with one of you about how things went last week in the small group prayer we had during the service.

1. And this guy said: "Well, it was awesome." Why? "Because we were able to go deep with one another so quickly." How? "Because one person was willing to get vulnerable to share honestly. And that just cracked open everyone else. We realized this is a safe place and we can go there with each other."
2. But it took that person's example, don't you see? They were confident enough, secure enough in the gospel to put themselves out there. And it influenced the group.

Think about the difference:

- a. We could have just exhorted everyone to share vulnerably, get real with each other, meanwhile we were all holding our cards close to our chest, praying about the weather, acting like we're fine. That wouldn't do anything.
- b. But if we couple that instruction with example, we open our hearts—"I need prayer, I'm broken, I'm struggling with sin," etc.—then there's a real power to it!

i. Then we're not just leading with our lips, we're leading with our lives.

F. It's like Paul says to Philippian believers in [Phil. 4:9](#): "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."

1. It's not just what you've heard from me, it's what you've seen in me.
2. It's not just my words, it's my life.

G. You can't truly give away what you don't truly have. If Jesus hasn't changed you, you're not going to change others. You lead from your life.

Characteristic #3: They Serve the Lord (Alone!)

A. I'm getting this from what Paul says there at the beginning of [v. 19](#) now. He sums up all he had been doing in Ephesus for those three years or more by saying: "I was '[serving the Lord . . .](#)'"

1. And I think that's interesting because, as we know, and as he goes on to elaborate, his whole time there was spent serving these people.

2. And yet he sums it all up by saying he was “[serving the Lord.](#)”
 - a. What do you make of that?
- B. Well, I think he’s getting at a very important point if you want to be a Christian influencer, or leader, or whatever. I think he’s accenting the importance of fundamental allegiances.
 1. If you truly want to influence people for Jesus, you cannot—in a fundamental or ultimate way—be serving them or it will ruin you and them.
 2. In the deepest place of your heart, you have to be serving the Lord, and him alone.
- C. Do you know what I mean by this?
 1. If I, as your pastor, make serving you my fundamental aim, I will not be able to lead you rightly.
 - a. I will be too worried about your opinions. I won’t just hope you like me, I’ll need you to like me to know that I’m okay, to know that I’m doing well.
 - b. I’ll find my worth and my joy in my approval ratings.
 - c. I’ll end up editing God’s Word to suit your desires. I’ll politic with the pulpit.
 - i. Because I’m trying to please people.
 2. If you as a parent make serving your kids your fundamental aim, you will not be able to lead them rightly.
 - a. If they’re all mad at you for making them go to church instead of sleeping in, you might start to fudge on that a bit.
 - b. If they’re pressuring you to do things with their friends that you just don’t feel are right before God, you might cave on that.
 - c. Because you want to be cool, you want to be liked by them, you had a bad relationship with your parents and you don’t want them to have that with you.
 - i. But it means too much to you. And because you’re serving them, not the Lord, you won’t serve them for the Lord.
 3. Listen, if Jesus put serving us ahead of serving his Father, we wouldn’t even be here. There would be no cross, there would be no salvation.
 - a. All of his disciples wanted him to avoid the cross. “[Far be it from you, Lord!](#)” Peter says ([Matt. 16:22](#)). “Don’t go there. Don’t do that.”
 - b. But thanks be to God Jesus wasn’t fundamentally serving us, but his Father. So he went there anyways, and he suffered, and he died.
 - i. And he did it serving God, so he could truly serve and save us.
- D. We can’t get this backwards! The only way I can influence you for Jesus is if Jesus means more to me than you. It’s a bit ironic, it sounds a bit paradoxical, but it’s how this works.

1. This is what Jesus means by those scandalous words he puts forth in [Luke 14](#): “²⁶ If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (vv. 26-27).
 - a. Of course we know he’s not saying: “Go off and hate on all these folks. Let’s burn our relationships to the ground!”
 - b. No, he’s talking about fundamental allegiances. He’s saying: “At the bottom, if it really comes to it, you only have one God, one Lord, one Master. It can’t be these people. It has to be God or you’ll be of no good for them.”
2. This is what Paul is wrestling with in [Gal. 1:10](#), when he says: “[A]m I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

E. Make your choice. What’s it going to be for you?

1. If you want to influence people for Jesus, you’ve got to serve the Lord alone.

Characteristic #4: They Come in Humility and Weakness

A. We see this when we carry on with Paul in [v. 19](#): “[I served the Lord] with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews . . .” “I was with you in weakness. My brokenness was put on full display.”

B. This is just not how you would think a real leader should come, right?

1. We think they should come with power and strength and eloquence and all this. They should impress us or why would we follow them?
2. But Paul comes humble, low, crying, hurting, needy.
 - a. It’s embarrassing. It’s shameful. It’s pathetic.
 - b. But it’s essential, if you’re going to really influence for Jesus.

C. If I could put it in a cheesy little rhyme for you: The people that you lead need to see that you need. Why?

1. Because you are not the Savior, Jesus is.
2. And you shouldn’t be ashamed to show people you need him just as badly as you’re telling them they need him. In fact, it’s important that you do so.
 - a. You actually influence people in the wrong direction when you act like you have to be all strong and put together if you’re going to be a mature Christian. No.
 - i. Honestly, that’s a sign of immaturity, insecurity. You have to hide. You need people to think well of you, to see your good side.

ii. Real maturity and security in the gospel says: “I don’t care if you see me low and broken. I don’t have anything to hide. Jesus accepts me as I am, and he’ll accept you to.”

b. As I’ve heard it put: “the church isn’t a trophy room full of saints, it’s a hospital full of sinners”—and the guy on the stage isn’t exempt from that, he’s the chief example.

D. Remember, 1 Cor. 1 . . .

1. God doesn’t choose the wise, or the powerful, or the noble class.
2. He chooses the foolish, the weak, the “low and despised in the world.” Why?

- a. So that people would see, not you, but him.
- b. “³⁰ [B]ecause of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,³¹ so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

i. I don’t have the wisdom. I don’t have the strength. But he does! Let’s look to him together.

E. Paul goes on to say something similar to our verse in Acts 20 just a few verses later in 1 Cor. 2. He says: “¹ [W]hen I came to you, brothers, [I] did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. . . .³ I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling . . . [why?! . . .]⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (vv. 1, 3, 5).

1. I don’t want you to be impressed with me.
2. I want you to be impressed with him!

F. I’ll tell you, as a pastor, this took me a little time to get used to.

1. People naturally want to look at you like you’re the guy with all the answers. And it’s easy to start playing into that, you want to play the part—not show your weakness and neediness and things.
2. But then I realized how important it is to show that even to people who are uncomfortable with it. I started calling it my “ministry of letdown.”
 - a. I have to let people down in this regard. I have to burst their bubble a bit—show my weakness, show my struggle with sin even.
 - b. And when I do, sometimes I can see the surprise. “Oh, I was expecting him to be more. He went to seminary. He preaches every week. Isn’t he supposed to be more put together? If he’s just as broken as me, why should I be listening to him?”
 - i. That’s what the Corinthians were doing with Paul. That’s why he’s writing that letter. He wasn’t impressive enough for them.

- ii. But he's saying here: "I'm not supposed to be. Jesus is the only one whose supposed to impress us. We're all broken and needy. He's the answer. Let's run after him together."

G. That's what real influential leadership looks like.

- 1. It's not the way of the world.
- 2. Sure, you may lose some followers in the process, just like Paul did. But it's important that people get let down by you so they can get lit up by Jesus.

Characteristic #5: They Share the Hard Truth

A. If you really want to influence people for Jesus you can't just tell them what they want to hear. You've got to tell them what they need to hear, whether they like it or not.

B. I think that's what Paul's referring to there in [v. 20](#) when he says: "[I did not shrink](#)' from declaring to you the truth, from teaching you God's Word, the good and the hard of it. I wasn't scared to say what needs to be said. Or if I was scared, I didn't give in to that fear."

- 1. The picture in my mind is like that of a band of soldiers standing on the front lines there. When the enemy comes, when a threat approaches—some shrink back, they withdraw, they turn and run; others stand firm, they hold their ground, they don't shrink.

C. He says the same sort of thing again down in [vv. 26-27](#): "[26](#) Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, [27](#) for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."

- 1. That really helps us understand the issue at hand, doesn't it?
 - a. What does it mean to not shrink back?
 - b. It means you declare the [whole counsel of God](#) . . . not just part of it . . . not just the part people want to hear, but even the part they don't.

D. You realize, don't you, that the cross of Jesus Christ has always offended people—for different reasons perhaps, but it's always offended nonetheless.

- 1. So back in [1 Cor.](#) (esp. [1:22-23](#)), Paul says for the Jew the cross offended because it looks so weak and powerless.
 - a. They wanted a Messiah to come with strength and redeem them from their physical oppressors.
 - b. And Jesus looks so pathetic hanging there. How can he help us if he can't even help himself?
- 2. But then for the Greek, the Gentile, Paul says, the cross offended them because they found it to be so foolish.

- a. They valued their philosophy and lofty ideas and wisdom and all this.
- b. And the cross is so crass, so unpolished. It's nonsense.

3. What is it in our day, in our culture?

E. Well, look at how Paul sums up his message there in v. 21: “²⁰ I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house,²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1. Would anyone today find anything offensive in that? Oh there's loads to be offended by. Consider the two key words there: “repentance” and “faith.”

a. Certainly we get offended by that word “repentance,” don't we?

- i. “Repent? Who do you think you are? Who are you to tell me that the way I'm living is right or wrong? It's not your life. It's mine. It's not your truth. It's mine. Get out of my business.”
- ii. We get that. No one, not even in the church, likes to be told to repent.

b. But what about “faith”? That seems a little more docile, doesn't it? Well, maybe so, until you look under the hood a bit and catch what's actually being implied here.

- i. Notice: Paul's not calling us to have faith in ourselves, but “faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- ii. Why? Well, implication: because you can't save yourself. You aren't strong enough, smart enough, good enough.
- iii. “²² [T]here is no distinction:²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:22-25).

(1) When you really get it, that's the greatest news in all the world!

(2) But do you want to know what it is at first? Offensive.

F. Honestly, this is the worst part of my job.

- 1. I hate it. Telling people what they don't want to hear but what, it seems to me, they really need to hear. I feel so arrogant doing that. Who am I? And it's scary, because it feels like you're throwing the whole relationship in jeopardy.
- 2. But you serve the Lord not man so that you can truly serve the Lord and man—which means you have to tell them.

- a. I had to write an email just last week where I felt like this is what I have to do out of concern for these folks.
- b. It took me hours to write it, because I hate this. I don't want to make them unhappy. I don't want to lose a friend. But I want to be able to say with Paul: “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (v. 27).

- G. So, listen, if you're going to influence people for Jesus you've got to share the hard truth, even if, at least at first, people despise you for it.
 - 1. It's like what Paul bemoans with the Galatians when he's trying to call them back to the gospel: "Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?" (Gal. 4:16). Sometimes you will. But it's worth the risk.
 - a. And, whether they feel it or not, it's all done in love . . .

Characteristic #6: They Do It All in Love

- A. Obviously, we know sometimes people share the hard word with a hard heart. They like to make you squirm, like to beat you with the Bible.
 - 1. But that's not what Paul is doing here. Look again at what he says there in v. 20: "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was [what?! . . .] profitable . . ."
 - a. This word in the original Greek as defined as that which "advances your best interests [and] is [truly] good for you" (BDAG).
 - 2. That's the motivation. I love you. I want the best for you. I want you to profit!
- B. I thought of what Jesus says when he's calling people to take up their cross and follow him.
 - 1. It sounds hard. It's not immediately fun. Pick up my cross? Die to this world? Why would I do that?
 - 2. Jesus' answer: profit.
 - a. Or as he puts it: "[W]hat will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26).
 - b. It feels hard at first, but it's so worth it in the end. That's why he says this. He loves us. He wants what's best for us.
- C. And that's what has to guide us as we seek to influence others for him as well.

Conclusion

- A. So as we close here, I want you be praying about three things:
 - 1. First, who is God calling you to influence for him. Who is it?
 - 2. And then, second, ask God to show you which of the six characteristics we saw here in our text you most need to grow in if you're going to be that influence for him?
 - 3. And then, third, just ask him for help. He's the quintessential Christian influencer. He's the one we're following in this. And we have his Spirit. He's here to help!