

Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer (Part 6)

Introduction

The Text

- A. This morning, we come to the last verses of [Acts 20](#).
1. As we've seen in previous weeks, Paul has been carrying on for quite a while (back up from [v. 17](#)), saying farewell to these elders of the local church there in Ephesus.
 2. And now, as we come to [vv. 36-38](#), Paul has wrapped up his more formal address, and we have before us what is, in my opinion at least, perhaps the most moving part of all of this. They're all so caught up with emotion, so overcome with affection, so reluctant to say a final goodbye, that it's almost as if they have been torn from each other's arms (cf. [Acts 21:1](#)).
- B. But let's read these final verses together now . . .

³⁶And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸being 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 20:36-38)

Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer

- A. If you've been with us, you know that through the course of [Acts 20](#), we've been talking about what it looks like to influence others for Jesus—the “critical characteristics of a Christian influencer” as I've put it.
1. We've at looked at 13 of these characteristics so far.
 2. And this morning, looking at Paul's example here in particular, I'm going bring out the last two: (14) They Make Friends; and (15) They Say Goodbye.

Characteristic #14: They Make Friends

Influence by Way of Intimacy

- A. I'm getting this idea from the deep relational connection we see Paul clearly must have had with these guys there in Ephesus.
1. Paul, in an effort to influence these brothers for Jesus, didn't just hit-and-run, nor did he merely speak to them of Jesus from afar. No.

2. He cultivated deep relationships with them. He made friends with them. And in the context of that relationship, that friendship—he changed them, he influenced them for God.
- B. This is what I would refer to as influence by way of intimacy.
1. A lot of times, we think that if we really want to change people, if we really want to influence folks for Jesus, we've got to get a bigger platform, a wider stage, a louder mic. We've got to write another post, put out another podcast, preach another message before yet another crowd.
 - a. We like to think we can change all these people—in mass, at once . . . from a distance.
 - i. And, don't get me wrong, God certainly can and does use these things.
 2. But that's not often how it really works. Most people are reached for Jesus little by little over time . . . in the context of relationship . . . friendship.
- C. My guess is that's how the majority of people in this room were reached and changed for Jesus.
1. Oh sure, you may have been encouraged by some big-name preacher or Christian author you've never met—C.S. Lewis, Tim Keller, John Piper, Billy Graham, whoever.
 2. But chances are there was also someone in your life who loved you and was there for you when you had questions and slowly walked with you towards Jesus.
 - a. There was a friend in the mix.
 - b. And hopefully there still are friends in the mix—influencing you, encouraging you, helping shape you in godliness.
 - i. That's how it works! Influence by way of intimacy.
- D. And what I want you to think about today is this: God wants you to be that friend for someone else. He wants you to be in the mix like that, helping them see him.

Even God Makes Friends

- A. It's interesting, when you look closely the biblical story, you realize even God himself goes about reaching us in this manner!
1. So Abraham—the one with whom God really got his whole redemptive program rolling in the world—we're told in [James 2:23](#) that he “[was called a friend of God](#)” (cf. [2 Chron. 20:7](#); [Isa. 41:8](#)).
 2. And do you remember how God approached things with Moses?
 - a. Moses would come into the tent of meeting that God had established and the LORD would “[speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend](#)” ([Exod. 33:11](#)).

b. And what effect did this intimate relationship have on Moses? It changed him. His face would glow with something of glory of God (cf. [Exod. 34:34-35](#)).

i. Influence by way of intimacy.

B. And, as you might expect, it's no different with Jesus.

1. This is the essence of the incarnation—I am drawing near, coming into your story. I want relationship with you.

2. This is why he was called “[a friend of tax collectors and sinners](#)” ([Luke 7:34](#)).

a. The religious leaders meant this as a knock against him.

b. But he wore the title as a badge of honor. “Of course I’m their friend! How are you going to reach or change anyone for God if you don’t befriend them?!”

3. As he says later to his disciples: “[I have called you friends . . .](#)” ([John 15:15](#)).

a. More on this to come later.

C. What I want to do now is consider this idea of friendship that influence for Jesus. And I want to ask three questions in particular: (1) What’s Involved in It?; (2) What Keeps Us from It?; and (3) How Can We Grow in It?

What’s Involved in It?

A. I’ve got three aspects for us here, all of which I’m drawing from Paul’s relationship with these Ephesian elders here in our text . . .

Aspect #1: Vulnerability

A. We get this. You can’t really be a friend with someone if you don’t open your heart and your life to them, if you don’t make yourself vulnerable.

1. Without that, they don’t really know you, and you won’t really know them.

B. It’s clear Paul’s been vulnerable with these guys. And it just comes out in such a moving way here in this closing scene. Let me give you a few examples of this . . .

EXAMPLE #1: THEY PRAY

A. First, they pray together. Look at [v. 36](#): “[And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.](#)”

1. If you’re really going to pray about the things that are on your heart with others, it’s a very intimate, very vulnerable thing.

- a. Of course, we can come together and put on our religious shows and puff ourselves up with pretense and pray to impress.
- b. But that's not what's happening here. Paul is pouring out his heart before God with them.

EXAMPLE #2: THEY WEEP

- A. Second, they weep together. Look at the first part of v. 37 now: "And there was much weeping on the part of all"
 1. It doesn't get much more tender, more vulnerable than tears.
 2. And let me remind you: this is a group of men, strong Christian leaders, crying with one another. Their hearts are gushing with affection for one another.

EXAMPLE #3: THEY EMBRACE . . . AND KISS

- A. But then, third and finally, they embrace each other, and dare I say it, they kiss.
 1. Let me just put this out here real quick: I love you, very much, I do. But if one of you were to come up and hug and then try to kiss me, I'd probably punch you in the gut, alright. That would just be my instinctual reaction. It would kind of creep me out.
 2. But in Paul's day, in his culture, that was an appropriate expression of affection. It's nothing shady, nothing weird. Just love and vulnerability.
- B. As one commentator puts it: In their culture at the time, "[b]rief kisses might be used in momentary greetings, but repeated kissing and embraces were signs of great affection, such as one would bestow on a family member, a dear teacher or a close friend; thus Paul had bonded deeply with these Christians" (IVPNTBC).
 1. This was no mere formal goodbye.
 2. These were the closest of friends. Their hearts had been knit together.
- C. Again, if you want to influence people for Jesus you've got to let people into your heart and life. You've got to let them know you, and you've really got to try to know and love them.
 1. But there's more involved in friendship that influences for Jesus . . .

Aspect #2: Sacrifice

- A. It's not just vulnerability, I'm letting you into my life and trying to get into yours. There's a laying down of my life for the sake of yours.
 1. That's why Jesus says, again back in John 15: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13). That's what friendship involves. Self-sacrificial love.

- B. We don't have time to go into this again, but that's what we've seen with Paul all through this little speech, right?
 - 1. That's why he ended the whole thing where he did, if you remember from last time: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (v. 35).
 - a. And he says that because that was his whole approach to this relationship. "I'm here not to take from you, but to give to you, to work hard for you, to serve you, to sacrifice myself for you."
- C. Any real friendship is going to require this.
 - 1. I don't just love you when you please me.
 - 2. I love you even when it costs me.
 - a. And that leads to the third thing involved in friendship that influences for Jesus . . .

Aspect #3: Commitment

- A. There's an endurance in real friendship. You're in it for the long haul. You go the distance with a person. It's not touch and go.
 - 1. So the author of Proverbs says: "A friend loves at all times . . ." (Prov. 17:17); and later: "[T]here is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24). There's a commitment. You can count on this friendship. It's not going anywhere.
- B. That's why, as we've seen, Paul was willing to stay there with these guys for three whole years (v. 31).
- C. But beyond this, even after he leaves as we see him doing here, even though we know, as he says, "none of you . . . will see my face again" (Acts 20:25)—"I'm not coming back," even though significant distance will separate them from this point forward . . . he still has them on his heart.
 - 1. How do I know?
 - a. Well, you realize don't you that the book of Ephesians was written to this Ephesian church sometime after his departure here in Acts 20, probably when he was held up in a Roman prison cell somewhere.
 - b. Even though he would never see their face again they never left his heart.
 - 2. Do you remember how he opens his letter? "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers . . ." (Eph. 1:16). "I still remember you. I still care about you. Of course I do. You're my friends."

What Keeps Us from It?

- A. This is what's involved in friendship that's really going to influence people for Jesus. But then we've got to ask and at least consider for a moment here: Why do we often struggle with this? What keeps us from this kind of friendship?

1. Well, perhaps unsurprisingly, the things that are involved in this kind of friendship (i.e. vulnerability, sacrifice, commitment) are the very same things that often keep us from it.

- a. In other words, the aspects I just got done outlining for us are also the barriers.

B. Think about it . . .

Aspect #1: Vulnerability

A. This isn't easy, is it?

1. You know. You get hurt in enough relationships, you don't want relationships anymore. It's exhausting. It's hard. It's painful.

B. In a place like Silicon Valley, one of the things that can be hard is that, even when you're friendships are good and healthy, you're just constantly saying goodbye to folks.

1. They're always moving out of the area and things—because of work, because of the cost of living, or whatever it may be.
2. And you think, I don't want to open myself up to more and start all over again, just to be let down.

C. So then, even if you do manage to make some new friends, you're tempted to play it safe, you hold your cards close to your chest, you aren't vulnerable.

1. Once you open yourself up and you let yourself truly be known and things, you share who you really are, that's when you run the risk of being rejected, taken advantage of, abandoned, hurt.

D. That's literally the definition of vulnerability: “vulnerability: the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.” There you go.

1. Who wants to do that?
2. So we spend a lot of our energy trying to avoid vulnerability, building up the walls, keeping ourselves safe.

E. It's scary to be vulnerable but it's so important.

1. How are they going to see what Jesus means to you if they don't really know you?
2. How are they going to see how badly they need Jesus if you don't talk about how badly you need him?

F. It's interesting. I've been told by other pastors: “As a pastor, you really shouldn't try to be friends with those in your congregation.” I say: “Really, well Jesus called his disciples friends, he was a friend of the tax collectors and sinners he was trying to reach. Why shouldn't I?”

1. I think sometimes this comes from past hurts.

2. As I've told you, as a pastor, people can have these expectations of what you're like. And when they see the real you, they're not impressed. You're a sinner just like them. You have your warts. Why should they listen to you?
- G. I saw this ridiculous headline making the rounds on social media a bit ago, and it was all about how Taylor Swift was making waves because she posted some photo of herself . . . get this . . . without makeup. (You know, she's always got that red lipstick and heavy eye-liner and all that.)
1. And some people applauded her bravery.
 2. But a lot of people were turned off and didn't even believe it was her. "That can't be her, she looks too normal." That's her face. That's the real Taylor Swift.
- H. What happens when they see you, the real you? What happens when they pull back the curtain and realize the wizard is just a dude? Will they still listen to you, follow you, be influenced by you?
1. I'm telling you: if you really want to influence people for Jesus, show your real face, don't be scared to show your need for him.
 - a. We don't need any more plastic Christians who pretend to be awesome, but God knows they're not.
 - b. We need the real thing.
 2. Some more self-righteous folks may reject you for it, that's true.
 3. But the folks that Jesus is really working on, they'll be encouraged. Because they'll see you're like them—and if Jesus extends grace to you he can extend grace to them.
 - a. They won't be impressed with you.
 - b. But they will be with the Jesus who loves you and forgives you and meets you in your mess.
- I. This is what Paul was willing to do—open his heart up to people at risk of rejection and pain. And do you know what, he is hurt by them.
1. We know right there in his speech that some of these guys are going to be wolves. They're not going to feed the sheep, they're going to feed on them. They're going to turn on Paul.
 - a. He knows that, even as he's loving them.
 2. But, beyond that, we know from what Paul later writes to Timothy that a lot of these folks in the Roman province of Asia, the chief city of which was Ephesus, they did turn on Paul—they grew ashamed of him because of his chains. They didn't want to be associated with him any longer.
 - a. So he writes in [2 Tim. 1:15](#): "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me"
 - i. I don't know exactly what happened here.

- ii. But it does seem like he likely could have abandoned, betrayed—even by a number of these guys here in our story, guys he so loved and cared for.
3. He was vulnerable with them and that ultimately opened him up to rejection and hurt.
- a. But it’s a risk worth taking if it means they have the chance to see Jesus in us!

Aspect #2: Sacrifice

- A. Most of us, if we’re honest, don’t get into relationships thinking: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). No. We get in thinking: “What can I get out of this? What’s in it for me?”
- 1. We make friends with folks who make us look better or feel better about ourselves.
 - 2. And we pull away from those who don’t.
 - a. We have relationships of convenience.
 - b. And the moment the relationship stops being convenient, we stop the relationship.
- B. This self-centered approach to friendship is what author of proverbs is talking about when he writes: “[E]veryone is a friend to a man who gives gifts” (Prov. 19:6). Or, put even more pointedly just a couple verses prior: “Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friend” (v. 4).
- 1. Were they really his friends? No. They just wanted to get what they could from him. And when he had nothing left to give, they had no reason left to stay.
- C. Around here, again in Silicon Valley, we have a lot of what I’d call “mercenary friendships.” That’s what happens with a lot of this networking you see.
- 1. Where you’re trying to “make friends” but it’s just parasitic. You’re trying to get up the corporate ladder or whatever.
 - 2. And befriending them will benefit you.
- D. I’m not saying there shouldn’t be mutuality in friendship, but I am saying that’s not why you get in—at least if you’re trying to influence people for Jesus, to love them like Jesus.
- 1. You get in knowing you’re going to give, but that’s okay because God says he has blessing for you in the outpour.

Aspect #3: Commitment

- A. Our culture in the present moment has a particularly palpable fear of commitment.
- B. We swim in a sea of options and we fear making any sort of commitment to one will cut us off from all the others.
- 1. That’s why we talk about FOMO or the “fear of missing out.”
 - 2. We end up holding everything loosely—our plans, our jobs, and even our relationships. If something better comes up for me, I’ll jump on that.

C. We live in the day of “ghosting.”

1. If this relationship isn’t going anywhere for me, I just disappear.
2. I don’t talk to you about it. I’m not committed to anything for the long haul. I’m just gone with the wind. Poof! . . . like a ghost.

How Can We Grow in It?

A. So this is hard. And I get that.

1. But if we want to really influence people for Jesus, we have to learn how to make friends, how to be good friends—how to be vulnerable with, sacrifice for, and commit to others.
2. So, assuming we want that, how do we grow in it?

B. Well, I think the way you grow in it is you really lean into the friendship Jesus has established with you in the gospel.

1. That’s what changes the way you deal with others.
2. You see the way he’s dealt with you.

a. No doubt, this is how Paul learned it. It’s how we can learn it too.

C. I said we’d circle back to Jesus and the way he influences by way of intimacy. Let’s look at that now. Jesus has done all this for you—vulnerability, sacrifice, commitment—it’s all there . . .

Aspect #1: Vulnerability

A. Jesus opens his own heart and life up to us.

1. I quoted from [John 15:15](#) earlier, but I didn’t read to you the verse in its entirety. Listen to what he says to his disciples here: “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”

a. That’s the place of openness of vulnerability. “I’m not keeping secrets. I’m not playing it safe. I’m letting you in. All that I have I share with you.”

B. And he invites them, not just into his triumphs, but into his pain.

Many have noted the striking parallel between what Paul is doing here with these Ephesian elders and what Jesus does with his own disciples.

1. Paul talks to them about his journey to Jerusalem and the suffering that awaits him . . . and they all pray and cry and say goodbye.
2. Similarly, Jesus tells his disciples what’s waiting for him in Jerusalem, the suffering and rejection . . . and then he invites them to come and pray with him there in Gethsemane before they have to say their goodbyes.

- a. And just like Paul is on his knees, heart breaking,
 - b. so too Jesus is there in Gethsemane, crying out to the Father.
 - i. He's letting his friends in. He's vulnerable.
- C. And this vulnerability opens him up to rejection. He knew it was coming all along, but that never stopped him.
 - 1. The disciples he says would all fall away from him and be scattered (Matt. 26:31). They would leave him to save their own necks.
 - a. And please don't imagine we'd be any different if we were there.
 - b. We can't be so naïve and self-confident, like Peter: " ³³ Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away. . . . ³⁵ Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" (Matt. 26:33, 35).
 - c. I've always been staggered by that line in one of our modern hymns: "Behold the man upon a cross, / My sin upon His shoulders; / Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice / Call out among the scoffers."
 - i. I like to think I would never go there. I would never do that.
 - ii. But in truth: I would go right along with the rabble.
 - (1) And he would love me still. "Father, forgive them . . ." (Luke 23:34).
- D. Beyond even this, as you know, Judas, one of the twelve Jesus had so shared his heart and life with, would go a step further and, not just run from him or deny him—he would betray him.
 - 1. And how does he do it, do you remember? With a kiss.
 - a. The mark of intimate friendship becomes the mark of black-hearted betrayal.
 - b. A kiss from the lips of Judas is a knife to the back of Jesus.
 - 2. And yet even still how does Jesus respond to him there in the garden with his whole gang of soldiers and people from the temple behind him, do you remember? Matt. 26:50: "Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you came to do.' Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him."
 - a. "Friend . . ." Making friends with Judas threw him open to the worst kind of rejection. And yet he did it anyways.
 - i. Because that's the kind of Savior he is, that's the kind of friend he is.
- E. You get that from him for you, and you become more like this for others. This is what enabled Paul's vulnerability.
 - 1. So what if they reject me. He was rejected for me.
 - 2. Whatever they might do to me, is nothing compared to what I have already done to him.

- a. And still he calls me friend.

Aspect #2: Sacrifice

A. We know that, for Jesus, relationship with me,

1. it is not a relationship of convenience. It is not a “mercenary friendship.”
2. The only thing he gets out of the deal is my sin.

B. But he leans in anyways.

1. And he doesn’t just give a little time, or a little money, or a little love.
2. He gives his life. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). That’s what Jesus does for us!

- a. Before he ever calls us to go and do that for others, he goes and does it for us!

Aspect #3: Commitment

A. What about commitment?

1. It’s crazy, if I were Jesus, the moment after my resurrection, I’d be booking the next train to heaven. Get me out of here.
 - a. Even my closest friends, my disciples—one of them betrayed me, another one denied even knowing me, all of them left me. I don’t want to see them again. I want to go home.
2. But that’s not what he does. He goes right back to these guys and encourages them. They’re still on his heart. He hasn’t forgotten them. He still loves them.

B. “[T]here is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24). Jesus is that friend!

1. That’s why Paul writes later in 2 Tim. 4, after all of Asia had turned away from him: “¹⁶ At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them [read: ‘Father, forgive them’]! ¹⁷ But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me” (vv. 16-17).
 - a. How is he able to still love even those who had abandoned him? He knows Jesus will never abandon him.

C. This is where it comes from. This is how we grow in it.

1. If you want to have friendships that influence others for Jesus, you have to lean into that friendship you have with Jesus and let him influence you.

Characteristic #15: They Say Goodbye

- A. If you want to influence people for Jesus, you've got to be willing to leave them for Jesus.
- B. Paul, it seems to me, has found the kind of friendships here you and I long for. Look at the affection and the love.
 - 1. When you and I find this sort of thing, when we finally find our people, our tendency is to cling to that with all we have. We work so hard to find it. I don't want to leave it.
 - 2. And yet here he is saying goodbye. Why?
 - a. Because Paul's fundamental allegiance isn't to the people he's hoping to influence for Jesus, it's to Jesus himself.
 - b. And if Jesus says, "Go" . . . it's time to go.
 - 3. What's even crazier is he's not just leaving the good, he's headed towards the hard.
 - a. Here people love him.
 - b. He's going to where people will hate on him.
 - i. But that's irrelevant. Because Jesus goes with me.
- C. Don't you see? Paul gets it. The mission is bigger than just this little crew of his. God's heart is for the world. Others need to hear this gospel. More need to be reached with love of Christ.
 - 1. We don't just huddle up and hang with our friends until Jesus returns.
 - 2. We go. Sometimes we say goodbye.
- D. I actually preached on this from [Acts 20](#) for my candidating sermon here over ten years ago now.
 - 1. They flew me in from Philly. They wanted me to preach so they could size me up, see what they thought of me.
 - 2. It was definitely scary. How many of you were here for that?
- E. But I preached on this text and this idea of what I called "gospel goodbyes"—because that's what was happening in this church at the time.
 - 1. Steve Fuller, the guy who planted the church over 30 years ago now was leaving this community to go plant another one in Abu Dhabi.
 - 2. And he had great relationships here. He wasn't running from hard stuff. He was leaving good stuff to go to hard stuff. Why?
 - 3. Because Jesus was calling him.
 - 4. So you say goodbye, with tears, with heartache.
 - a. And do you know what? Even as you leave people for Jesus it leads people to Jesus.
 - b. Because they see in you, Jesus must be worth more than these friendships, than the best stuff of this life. And he is. He is!
- F. So do you want to be a Christian influencer? We've looked at now 15 characteristics for you to consider. Let's pursue them together!