

# Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer (Part 2)

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## Introduction

### The Text

- A. We're in the section of Acts now where Paul is wrapping up his third and final missionary journey and he's heading back to Jerusalem where he knows suffering and affliction await him.
- B. And so here in [Acts 20](#) he's saying goodbye to folks. In particular, he's saying goodbye to the elders of the church he helped plant there in Ephesus. He's called them to come meet with him. He addresses them for quite a few verses. And then he departs.
  - 1. Last week we took in the entirety of this scene, from [v. 17](#) all the way to the end of the chapter.
  - 2. This morning, for the sake of time, I'm going to just dip into those verses we'll be particularly focusing on ([vv. 22-24](#)), reading back up from [v. 17](#) for context. So, in all, let's read [vv. 17-24](#).

<sup>17</sup> Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. <sup>18</sup> 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, <sup>19</sup> serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; <sup>20</sup> how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, <sup>21</sup> testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. <sup>24</sup> 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. (Acts 20:17-24)

### "Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer"

- A. Paul is here addressing these leaders in the Ephesian church, preparing them to function and flourish even after his departure.
  - 1. And, therefore, as we might expect, we learn a lot from this about what healthy Christian leadership should look like in particular.
  - 2. But this is relevant for every Christian because, as I said last time, if you're a follower of Jesus you're called to be a leader of somebody. It might not be a whole church. It could be your kids, your spouse, a younger believer, a coworker. But there's somebody. And God wants you to influence them for him.
- B. So, then, we find in these verses that carry on to the end of the chapter what I've called the "Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer."

- a. If you want to influence people for Jesus, here are the sorts of things that will get you there.
- C. I said we'll probably spend about 4 weeks on this, considering these critical characteristics one-by-one.
- 1. Last time, we focused in on [vv. 17-21](#) and I drew out six of these characteristics: (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.
  - 2. This week, as I said, we're going to focus in on [vv. 22-24](#) and I've got three more characteristics for us: (7) They Get Alone with God; (8) They Answer with Abandon; and (9) They Treasure Jesus Over Everything.

## Characteristic #7: They Get Alone with God

### "Constrained by the Spirit"

- A. I'm getting this from what Paul says there in [v. 22](#) in particular: "[And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem,](#)" he says, "[constrained by the Spirit . . .](#)" (cf. [Acts 19:21](#)).
- 1. It's an intriguing word choice there, isn't it? "[Constrained.](#)" It means to be "[bound](#)" or "[tied up](#)" in some way. God's really got ahold of him.
- B. And I just want to know: How does he know? How does Paul know what God is wanting him to do, where God is calling him to go? How does he get a sense of the Spirit's constraint as we see here?
- 1. Don't you want something like this in your own life—to know what God would say to you, what God would be calling you to do?
  - 2. How does Paul get it?
- C. Well, the answer I think, though admittedly it's not right on the surface of our text is this: He gets alone with God. This kind of conviction is the fruit of that kind of devotion.
- 1. I can just tell you: You don't get a sense of what God is wanting you to do by spending time amid the rush and noise of the crowd.
  - 2. You get a sense of these things by stepping away from the rush and the noise of the crowd for a bit and getting quiet in the desolate place before God.

### A Paradoxical Principle

- A. But, now, it's interesting. If you're putting all this together so far, I realize it might seem a bit paradoxical. It might feel a little backwards. Because, remember, big picture: we're focusing on the critical characteristics of a Christian influencer.

1. When we hear the word “influencer” we think of it as it’s used in the social media world and there it’s almost synonymous with platform, isn’t it? The only way you reach “influencer” status in that world is if you have a big enough following, you’ve got a crowd around you, hanging on your word.
    - a. So we’re tempted to think, naturally, if I want to be a Christian influencer, if I want to really influence the people of my generation for Jesus, that’s what I need, a platform, a following, subscribers, views, likes, whatever . . . a crowd!
  2. But here I’m saying: If you really want to be a Christian influencer, it works, at least at first, in the other direction. You’ve got to push away from the crowd, you’ve got to get alone.
    - a. I’m not saying you don’t come back to the crowd. I’m not saying it’s wrong to have a platform.
    - b. I’m saying you have to start by getting alone with God and you keep coming back to that place, or however else you may be influencing folks, you won’t be influencing them for Jesus.
      - i. Because you’ll lose touch with him, you’ll lose that sense of the Spirit’s constraint.
      - ii. And before you know it, you won’t be leading the crowd, you’ll just be going right along with them.
- B. It makes sense, doesn’t it? You can’t influence others for Jesus if you’re not being influenced by Jesus. And the way you put yourself in position to be influenced by him, of course, is by spending quality time with him.
1. If you really want to influence people for Jesus, you don’t start by pursuing a platform out in public, you start by pursuing Jesus yourself in private. That’s where it begins.
  2. And you let him do whatever he wants to do with your “platform.” Whether he builds it up or shrinks it down, it doesn’t matter so much.
    - a. What matters is that you be and do and say the things he wants you to be and do and say, regardless of what the crowd thinks.

## The Way of Jesus

- A. Jesus never pursued the platform. You realize that, don’t you? And even when the crowds came, he never lost that private, personal connection with his Father.
- B. So, for example, in [Luke 4](#), reports were already spreading about him and his miracles, his fame was growing, crowds were forming, but then in [v. 42](#) we read this: “[And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place.](#)” (Mark tells us it was “very early in the morning, while it was still dark” [Mark 1:35].)
  1. He’s getting alone with his Father. He’s getting clarity on what he’s called to do.
  2. And that’s why, when the crowd comes and finds him, he’s not beholden to them, he’s able to go as God leads, not as they demand.

a. So then v. 43: “<sup>42</sup> And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them,<sup>43</sup> but he said to them, ‘I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.’”

- i. It’s not that he didn’t love the people of that town.
- ii. It’s that he’s getting his marching orders from his Father, not from them.

(1) And he gets a sense of those marching orders by getting away from them, so he can truly lead them when he’s with them.

C. We see the same sort of thing later in [Luke 5:15-16](#), where Luke tells us: “<sup>15</sup> But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities.<sup>16</sup> But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.”

1. This is great. I have a platform. Okay.
2. But I’ll be no good for those people if I’m not first connected intimately, personally, privately with my Father.

## How Much More for Us?!

A. And, brothers and sisters, my goodness, if it was that way for Jesus, how much more so for us?!

B. That’s why Jesus is always trying to teach his disciples to do this. He’s always bringing them into this way of life.

1. So in [Mark 6:31](#), instructs his disciples: “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.”
2. Or in [Luke 9:28](#), we read that “he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.”

a. He wants them to know: Sure, there may be a public dimension to your influence—glory to God!—but it’s all the fruit of a deep-rooted devotional relationship with him.

- i. The private precedes the public.
- ii. If you get that backwards, the whole thing comes undone.

C. That’s why the French philosopher Blaise Pascal would say (somewhat hyperbolically perhaps, but to great effect): “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone” (*Pensées*).

D. It’s why Dietrich Bonhoeffer would famously write in his wonderful little book *Life Together*: “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community” (77).

1. What he means is: If you’re not able to get alone with God, you will not approach the community rightly, and you certainly won’t influence them for Jesus.

- E. Moses' face only shone before others after spending time in God's presence alone in the tent of meeting.
  - 1. So will it be for us.
  
- F. Put simply: this means, if you really want to be a Christian influencer, you've got to get alone with Jesus, read your Bible, and pray.
  - 1. This is not just something you do on Sundays.
  - 2. It's something that gets embedded in your life—a regular rhythm, a holy habit.
    - a. Like Jesus . . . and like Paul.
      - i. That's how he gets a sense of what the Spirit is constraining him to do.
      - ii. And it's how he comes to have the influence he does for Jesus on those around him.

## Should We Talk Like This?

- A. Now, I can't spend much time on this, but I did at least want to clarify something . . .
  - 1. You may read this story about Paul and wonder: Should you and I talk like this? "The Holy Spirit is constraining me to do this or that particular thing"?!
    - a. I'll tell you, I bring this up because I think we can get in a lot of trouble when we don't this calibrated properly.
  
- B. In my opinion, it seems people go off here in either extreme.
  - 1. On the one hand, some, like many of the Presbyterian folks at my seminary think that there's no way we should talk like this, nor should we even expect any sort of personal or particular guidance whatsoever.
 

They say God has revealed what we need most already in Scripture. Stick with that and stop asking God for person guidance on particular matters in your life. You have the general principles. That's enough.

    - a. And while I'd say If you have to err, this is a much "safer" place to err, maximize the Word of God over personal impressions, I do think it misses something of the intimacy we can and should have in prayer seeking Jesus.
    - b. He gives us his Spirit so we can know him and have a sense not just of his general oversight and will but of his particular care and shepherding touch in our life.
  - 2. On the other hand, there are some of the more hyper-charismatic variety who are prone to go too far in the opposite direction.

They're tempted to talk like everything is a "word from the Lord" and they can spend so

much energy seeking him on personal matters that they miss the general principles already laid down in Scripture.

- a. In fact, in the worst examples of this, the Scripture takes a backseat to what “the Spirit is saying” at a particular point, because they feel some fire in their bones or whatever.
- b. This is a dangerous place to be. Uprooted from Scripture, adrift in your “feelings” and “impressions.” People have been carried off into countless errors through such teaching and practice.

C. So what then are we to make of this? Well, I’ll tell you, a lot of it hinges on who Paul is.

1. He’s exemplary for us in many ways and we are to imitate him in many things.
2. But I personally don’t think this instance is one of them. I don’t think you and I should say about matters of personal and particular guidance: “the Holy Spirit is constraining me” or “thus says the Lord . . .” Why?

- a. Well, put simply, Paul is an apostle, and we are not. He had a unique relationship to Jesus, with unique promises attached to it, and a unique calling to literally give us God’s Word.

- i. So, against the extreme on the charismatic side, I would say we shouldn’t talk with so much confidence about things that are not already made clear in Scripture for us.

D. But that doesn’t mean we should, with the more extreme cessationists on the other side, just give up on seeking God’s personal guidance for our lives entirely. No!

1. I think you should seek him for what he would have you do, how he would have you apply in your life personally what he’s already laid out in Scripture generally.

- a. I just would be careful to avoid language like “the Holy Spirit is constraining me”
- b. and would instead soften it a bit and say: “I feel like the Holy Spirit is calling me to go here or do this.”

- i. But you’re open to redirection because you’re not an apostle, you can get this wrong.

E. Perhaps it will help you to think of it like this. Unless, you’re ambidextrous, we all have one dominant hand. For most people it’s the right hand, so I’ll assume that for the sake of this illustration.

1. I’m just saying pick up the Scripture with your dominant hand, with your right hand. Hold it tight, don’t let that go.

- a. Regarding what God has revealed to us in the Bible, through the prophets and apostles, we can say that we are “constrained by the Spirit” to do it.

2. We are given these general principles. And we hold to them. But the particular application sometimes is a little fuzzy in the Bible.
    - a. And that's where, absolutely, we pray over what God wants us to do, guided by Scripture's parameters, and we try to follow his leading into the particulars.
    - b. But we hold it with our left hand. You still pray over things and try to discern, but you just don't have the same kind of grip on it as you do the Bible.
- F. Just to give you an overly simple example: the Scriptures makes it plain we are called to love our neighbor. You don't get to wiggle out of that one. It's the second great commandment Jesus says. It's God's will for you.
1. You hold that in your right hand. You are constrained by the Spirit to pursue that.
  2. But, how it works out in your life, what course it takes, how you apply such a command, that's between you and God and prayer. You can't do everything, so what should you do? You pray and maybe you sense God saying you should bring some food over for your sick coworker or something.
    - a. Now, do you say "the Holy Spirit is constraining me" to bring chicken noodle soup to you?
    - b. No. You say the Spirit is "constraining me" to love my neighbor, I know that. "I feel like" he's leading me to bring this soup over for you. So I want to try to follow and see where it goes.
- G. It could be this way for countless things . . .
1. Right hand: I know we are called to care for orphans and widows and people in distress.
  2. Left hand: I feel like God is wanting us to sign up to be foster parents. I'm not sure, but let's see!
  3. Right hand: I know I am supposed to not forsake gathering with Christians, that I should be a meaningful member of a local church
  4. Left hand: I feel like he's calling me to plug into this church.
    - a. Whether it works out or it doesn't, the right hand still has a grip on the Scripture.
    - b. The left hand can let go and pick up something else, some other application of it. I'm not constrained to it. I don't know for sure.
- H. Do you catch the difference? Oh I tell you, we would be saved from much confusion if we could get this right. But let's move on . . .

## Characteristic #8: They Answer with Abandon

## “Not Knowing What Will Happen to Me There”

- A. I’ll be quick for this one. But I’m getting it from what Paul goes on to say when we finish out v. 22. Look at it again: “[And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there . . .](#)” Isn’t that crazy?
1. I’m going because he says go.
  2. But there’s a lot I don’t know about what’s coming around the bend.
- B. A lot of times, when we think of someone who is a strong leader or compelling influencer, we think of someone who has a plan, someone who has it all worked out, someone who knows where they’re going and what’s going to happen when they get there.
1. And, of course, there’s some truth to that.
  2. But here Paul says: “I don’t know what’s going to happen. But I do know the one who’s calling me, the one who goes with me, the one who’s got me, and that’s enough for me.”
- C. So if you want to be a Christian influencer, if you want to influence others for Jesus . . .
1. You can’t wait until you have it all figured out, until you know the end from the beginning.
  2. You have to go when you sense he’s telling you to go, even if there’s a lot you still don’t know.
- D. The author of Hebrews tells us: “[By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going](#)” (Heb. 11:8).
1. He’s referring to the story in [Gen. 12](#) where we read: “[Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’](#)” (v. 1).
    - a. “[T]o the land that I will show you.” He hasn’t even shown him the land yet. What if it’s no good? What if it’s dry and desolate, or what if it’s full of enemies?
    - b. What if instead of leading you to a place like Carmel or San Luis Obispo or some other coastal California town, he leads you to Fresno or, worse, Bakersfield?
  2. But, v. 4: “[So Abram went, as the LORD had told him . . .](#)”
    - a. He didn’t know where he was called to go but he knew who was calling him to go there. And that’s all he needed.
    - b. And that’s why God made him a blessing to all the nations.
      - i. He had great influence on others for God, not because he had great insight into the future and what would happen and when, but because he had great faith in his great God.
      - ii. And he just went. He answered with abandon.

- E. Peter is on the right track with this when he sees Jesus walking on the water in the midst of that storm—and you remember what he cries out to him from the boat: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (Matt. 14:28). And Jesus says: “Come” (v. 29).
1. So he came. He stepped out. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. This is insane. What am I doing? It doesn’t matter what I’m called to do, it matters who is calling me to do it. If it’s you Lord, command me to do it and I will. Even though I have no idea how this is going to work out, in a sense, I do, because I know you. And you’re faithful.”
- F. I’ll tell you, this one is especially hard for me. I’ve come to realize I really like control. I like to thoroughly think through things before I get going—to manage all the details.
1. Sometimes that’s good, right? You want to be faithful. You want to count the cost and all this.
  2. But other times I go too far with it. There’s something deeper in me where I can be afraid of failure, I want a guarantee of success before I set out.
    - a. So I think through all the angles, not just because I’m faithful but because I’m faithless.
    - b. I want to know what’s going to happen in Jerusalem. And I don’t want to go if I don’t know.
      - i. But, don’t you see? I’m centering on the wrong thing! I’m obsessing over the what and forgetting about the who! I don’t have to know what all is going to happen if I know the one who is with me as I go!
- G. It’s a critical characteristic of a Christian influencer: They Answer with Abandon.

## Characteristic #9: They Treasure Jesus Over Everything

### “Imprisonment and Afflictions Await Me”

- A. If you noticed, I actually cut Paul off mid-sentence there to draw out that last point.
1. When we come now to finish his thought, we realize it’s not entirely accurate to say he didn’t know anything about what was waiting for him there in Jerusalem.
  2. Oh he did know something. It’s just the kind of thing you wish you didn’t know.
    - a. What does he say? Look at vv. 22-23 in their entirety now: “<sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.”
- B. Can we just jettison right now the notion that the God’s will for you is that you always be healthy, wealthy, and prosperous?!

1. Here we see the Holy Spirit doesn't lead Paul away from danger, away from hardship, away from persecution.
2. No, the Holy Spirit leads him right into it. "I don't know much about what's waiting for me, oh but I do know this: it's going to be a rough go."

C. But he's willing to go forward with it, why? . . .

### "The Grace of God"

A. Well, look at what he goes on to say in v. 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."

B. I think the key to all of this is found there with that phrase at the end of v. 24: namely, "the grace of God."

1. When you truly taste the goodness of the grace of God for you in Jesus, you are willing to let all else go—that you might get it, that you might keep it, that you might share it.

C. This is what Paul says countless times in his epistles:

1. So, in one place he writes: "<sup>7</sup> [W]hatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ . . ." (Phil. 3:7-8).
2. In yet another place, he says: "<sup>14</sup> [T]he love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor. 5:14-15). He lost his life for me, I can lose my life for him . . . and for you.
3. He puts it, perhaps most memorably for us, in Phil. 1:21: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

D. It's all just a reiteration, just an echo of this all-controlling conviction: "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" (Acts 20:24).

### "I'm Sorry I Didn't Take My Faith More Seriously!"

A. I had a dream the other night, very vivid, about my Gramma. I hesitate to share this, because I don't think it was prophetic about her or anything, but it was very powerful, for me.

1. Many of you know my Gramma on my dad's side just recently passed, just a month or so ago now.
2. Megan and I did a quick shotgun to Lexington, KY where she lived and attended the funeral and all that.

3. She was 94, amazing woman, very generous with her time and her resources. She was the glue for our extended family really. I owe a tremendous deal to her.
  4. One thing I always did wish I would see more of was her faith. It was there, I think. There was enough for me to be hopeful. But it wasn't as deep as you would want.
    - a. She was Catholic and would do the ritual, but it was never clear to me at least that Jesus really had her whole heart, had her affection, if you know what I mean.
    - b. I get it, we all have different ways of expressing it, but I just would have loved to have seen more.
  5. Well, anyways, she went downhill so quickly that I actually couldn't even get a Zoom call with her to say goodbye.
    - a. We saw her at the Family Reunion a few months back, so that was good, but once she took a turn towards the end, she was just gone.
    - b. So it was hard for me, I didn't really get to say goodbye. I mouthed the word over her open casket at the wake. But that was it.
- B. So that's what made this scene in my dream all the more powerful for me.
1. I was back in Kentucky. And my Gramma had already passed. The scene was playing out as it had in reality.
  2. Except this time, somehow we had found this strange time machine dial. And you could turn it back and go back an hour, a day, a week. Not too far, but enough to get me back to before my Gramma had died.
  3. And so that's what I did. I turned it back. And I was there with her. And we embraced. And even though I would have wanted to give her the biggest hug I could manage, I had to be careful because her body at this point, near the end, it was just a bag of bones. I could feel it.
  4. But here's what was so crazy for me. As we embraced, she was sobbing, I mean sobbing, and in between sobs she was saying: "Nicholas, I'm sorry I didn't take my faith more seriously." She knows, I often talked to her about it. I woke up sobbing myself.
- C. Now, I don't know what exactly to make of that. I'm not trying to imply one way or another about my Gramma and where she's at with Jesus. As I said, the dream was probably more a projection of my own feelings than some sort of prophetic thing from God or whatever.
1. I don't know what to make it exactly.
  2. But I do know this: you don't want to be saying that at the end of your life. You don't want to be sobbing with regret, wishing you had taken your faith more seriously.
    - a. "I did the church thing, I read my Bible from time to time, but I didn't live all out for Jesus, he didn't have my whole heart."
    - b. You don't want to be like that. You don't want to be saying that.
- D. It was a reminder to me, to you: Go all in. Don't hold back.

1. Death is coming, the end is coming. Even if you can manage to avoid all manner of suffering and postpone the inevitable a couple more decades, so you can go frolic on the beach in retirement and all this, you'd still be lucky to get to 94. And then that's it.
  2. From the perspective of eternity, the Bible says these days are a vapor, a mist, a passing cloud. It's here and then it's gone . . . and then it's God . . . forever!
    - a. What are you living for? Are you living in light of that? Why are we investing so much of our time, energy, resources into life this side of heaven—getting our toys, getting our stuff in order, getting our comforts padded around us, getting our best life now.
    - b. Our best life isn't now. Our best life is to come. And it will be better—both now and later—if we live for later now. Are you with me?
- E. It's like what Paul says at the very end of [1 Tim](#). He's encouraging us to let go of the stuff of this life, loosen our grip on it, not so we can be held under a cloud and miserable all our days, but so we have room in our hands to ["take hold of that which is truly life"](#) (6:19).
- F. ["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"](#) (Acts 20:24).
1. It's a critical characteristic of a Christian influencer: They Value Jesus Over Everything!
    - a. Is that you?