

Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer (Part 5)

Introduction

The Text

- A. We continue looking at Paul's farewell speech to the elders from the church there in Ephesus.
 - 1. He's about to board a ship—making his way towards Jerusalem—and he knows he's not coming back. There will be no more face-to-face engagement. He won't get to return and personally care for this church he so loves.
 - 2. So he's trying to get these guys ready. He's preparing them to lead, especially in his absence.
 - 3. And, as you might imagine, then, he's got a lot of important things to say.

- B. This morning, though the scene itself continues on to the end of the chapter, we come to the closing words of his speech. And that's what we're going to focus in on this morning, [vv. 33-35](#). So let's read them together now . . .

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." (Acts 20:33-35)

Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer

- A. For four weeks now, we've been talking about what it looks like to influence others for Jesus.
 - 1. As elders in a local church, these guys in our text had more formal positions of influence.
 - 2. But, as I've said, every Christian is called to influence others for Jesus in one way or another (e.g. with your spouse, your kids, your neighbors, your coworkers, other believers, etc.).
 - a. We're all called to be "Christian influencers" in this general sense.

- B. And in this farewell address given by Paul here to the Ephesian elders, we're given, I think, what I've been referring to as the "Critical Characteristics of a Christian Influencer."
 - 1. We've seen twelve of these characteristics to this point. We'll have fifteen when all is said and done.
 - 2. But, this morning, in light of the verses just read, I want to add one more to the list: (13) They Don't Fleece the Sheep.
 - a. For this, I'll organize my thoughts under three headings: (1) A Craving to Get (from others); (2) A Call to Give (to others); and (3) A Blessing in Disguise.

(1) A Craving to Get (from others)

A Jarring Transition

- A. Last week, if you were here, you'll remember I made a very big deal about v. 32, noting in particular that we're getting to the end of Paul's little speech and that, therefore, these are some of his very last words to the elders, and, likely then, also some of the most important.
1. This is the crescendo, the climax, the grand finale.
- B. And v. 32 is all about the word of God's grace, the gospel: "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."
1. And I said he's going there here at the end, because that's what they so desperately need now and always. And that's true.
 - a. And, honestly, if I were Paul, I would have ended my address right there.
 - b. It sounds like the end, doesn't it? "And now I commend you, commit you, entrust you to God and his grace, he's got you."
 - c. It strikes a wonderfully hopeful last note. It brings us back to Jesus—the one who saves us at the start and sustains us to the end.
- C. But that's not where Paul closes things. There's this seemingly jarring transition.
1. As we move from v. 32 to v. 33 now, it's almost as if we've slipped and fallen from the lofty mountain peak of God's glory and grace and have come crashing back down to reality with a thump and a thud.
 2. All of a sudden we're talking about money and greed and we're reminded of the propensity of Christian leaders to do all of this ministry stuff for selfish gain.
 - a. Well, that's a buzz kill if ever there was one. "God's got you. He will carry you to glory! Oh . . . and make sure you watch out for greed."
- D. These really are the last words Paul gives to the brothers here. Why? Why end here . . . on this note?
1. Because the temptation is real. They're going to be tempted.
 2. And anyone who desires to influence others for Jesus, to minister to people, to reach them for him—they're going to be tempted to use their influence, to use their ministry as an opportunity to get from them for themselves.
 - a. They're going to be tempted to fleece the sheep.
- E. So Paul says: "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel" (v. 33).

1. "I didn't lead you with a view to what I could get from you. Follow me in this.
2. And beware of that wretched craving."

F. It's one of the saddest things, isn't it?

1. People can put on ministry like a mask.
2. They look like shepherds but lick their chops like wolves.
3. They don't come in to feed the sheep, but to fleece them.

A Perennial Issue

A. It's a shame to say, but this has always been an issue:

1. That's why, in both places where Paul lists out the qualifications for an elder in the church, he puts an emphasis on this point: "[An overseer must] not [be] a lover of money" (1 Tim. 3:3). "He must not be . . . greedy for gain . . ." (Titus 1:7).
 - a. Be on the lookout for this in anyone who might aspire to lead or influence others for Jesus.
 - b. On the outside, they may seem godly, but on the inside they're just greedy. They've got their heart set on something, and it isn't God.
 2. So in Rom. 16:18, Paul warns the church of false teachers, saying: "[S]uch persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive."
 3. Similarly in Phil. 3:19, he writes: "[T]heir god is their belly, . . . [their] minds [are] set on earthly things."
 4. Later, to Timothy, he says these people are "depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain" (1 Tim. 6:5).
 5. And to Titus he writes: "They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach" (Titus 1:11).
 6. Peter says of them: "³ [I]n their greed they will exploit you with false words. . . .¹⁴ They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed" (2 Pet. 2:3, 14).
- B. The issue really stretches back beyond the NT into the OT and Israel. In fact, I got the imagery of a shepherd fleecing the sheep from what God says through the Prophet Ezekiel about these manipulative, deceptive, voracious shepherd-leaders there among the Jews, Ezek. 34:1-4: "¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.'"
1. You were supposed to care for them. Instead you're exploiting them!

- C. And, of course, Paul is warning these Ephesian elders about this, because it's not always something out there—in that church, in those leaders or ministers, in the newspaper headlines, or whatever.
 - 1. Sometimes it's right here—in our church . . . but, more than that: in us, in our own hearts. How tempting it is to do things for God and others while really just hoping to get things for ourselves.

Why Do We Do This?

- A. And I just want to lean in on this uncomfortable reality with you for a little bit and consider more fully: Why do we do this? Where does this come from? What do we stand to gain? What do we sometimes use ministry and leadership and influence to get? When we fleece people, what's the "wool" we're after?
 - 1. The Scriptures identifies at least three types of wool we could be craving in this: (1) Pennies; (2) Praise; and (3) Power.

Wool #1: Pennies

- A. With this, of course, I'm just referring to what Paul is explicitly talking about in our text. Sometimes you can use ministry as a means of getting money, possessions, stuff.
 - 1. You can twist people's consciences, get them to give—"sow a seed," support your ministry, "God's ministry."
 - a. This is one of the reasons, if you've noticed, probably to a fault, I struggle to really even mention giving. I do it quickly, in passing, and that's about it. Because I don't want you to think I'm in it for your money.
 - b. But it can be a struggle for leaders.
- B. This is what had Judas, is it not? He's following along with the disciples, walking with Jesus, but his heart is set on money.
 - 1. He used to steal from the common purse they had, literally robbing from God ([John 12:6](#)).
 - 2. And, eventually, when it all comes down, he's willing to turn Jesus over for a little silver ([Matt. 26:15](#)).
- C. This is what had the Pharisees as well. As Luke tells us in [Luke 16:14](#): even though they were outwardly religious and "God-fearing," truly "[they were lovers of money . . .](#)"
- D. This is what Jesus is warning his disciples about in [Luke 20:47](#) when he says: "Listen, you need to watch out for those religious leaders who use their spiritual influence as an opportunity to '[devour widows' houses . . .](#)'"
 - 1. They go after the weak and vulnerable. They take advantage of the defenseless. They manipulate and trick them—"in the name of God."
 - 2. As one commentator puts it: "[Evidently some of the scribes encouraged impressionable widows to make gifts beyond their means](#)" (TNTC).

- a. Does that not sound like so many of the televangelists and prosperity preachers of our day? I remember we had to protect my widowed grandma from this nonsense. She was getting swindled by a silver-tongued preacher.
- b. It's sick. That's why Jesus goes on to say: "[These guys] will receive the greater condemnation" (v. 47).

Wool #2: Praise

- A. Here is another wool that can be really enticing. We serve in the church, we do all this ministry stuff, we influence others—we encourage them to praise Jesus even, but really what we want is for them to praise us.
 1. We want to be admired, seen as special, significant, smart, and so forth. And we use Christianity to get it.
- B. Jesus hits this one especially hard in the Sermon on the Mount, [Matt. 6](#): “¹ Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them² Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. . . .⁵ And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.¹⁶ And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others” (vv. 1-2, 5, 16).
- C. There are a lot of ways you can go about trying to get the praise of man.
 1. We think of things like achievement in sports, or music, or film, or in the university, or in the home, or in the office.
 2. But don't forget we can try to use the church, use Jesus, for the same sort of thing as well. “Look at how much Bible I know. Look at how holy I am.”
- D. I can't tell you how many times I've been convicted leading musical worship from this stage. I'm lifting my voice praising God, while in my heart I'm truly craving the praise of man. “How do I look? How do I sound? I hope their impressed—not with him, with me.” It's a problem. It's a battle.
 1. Fleecing the sheep for the wool of praise.

Wool #3: Power

- A. Some people use Jesus as a means of getting power for themselves over others.
 1. It's exhilarating to be in charge. You can speak in the name of God. You can quote his Word. People listen. They respect you. It can be intoxicating. It can go to your head.
 2. Only God really has that authority, but you try to smuggle some of that for yourself.
- B. We see this sort of thing with James and John, when they're asking Jesus if they can sit at his right and left hand in glory ([Mark 10:37](#)). It's a position of power.

1. And when the other disciples hear about it, they're indignant—not because they think James and John shouldn't have asked for such a thing, but because they want to sit there. They want the power. They want to be the greatest. It's a temptation.
- C. This is why Jesus says the religious leaders love being called “rabbi” (Matt. 23:7)—which, in Hebrew, means: “my teacher; my master; my lord.”
1. For a lot of ministers, this is a real struggle. I know some guys who demanded that their congregation call them “Pastor.” It really rubbed me the wrong way.
 2. For me, it's kind of the opposite. I honestly feel weird if you call me pastor. It's fine if you do, I know you're just trying to respect me and things. But I don't like feeling like I'm set apart from anyone else in here.
 - a. In fact, it's kind of funny (although not really): We've been having scammers pretending to be me online lately, emailing other leaders and things from our webpage, trying to trick them into sending money their way.
 - b. It's actually gotten so bad, I had to email our leaders. And one of things I said is: Listen, if the guy signs off the email “Pastor Nick” or we have one signed “Reverend Nick”—you can know right there, that's not me :)
- D. But, nevertheless, it can be tempting to fleece the sheep for the wool of power.

The Issue Beneath the Issue: Idolatry

- A. Underneath it all, the issue beneath the issue, is idolatry. Something other than God is our god.
1. That's what Paul's word “covet” there in Acts 20:33 tips us off to: “I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.” It's the language of idolatry.
 - a. As he says in Col. 3:5: “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (cf. Eph. 5:5).
- B. When you covet, when you look at something and say: “I have to have it”—whether we're talking about pennies or praise or power—you are saying, in effect: “This thing will make me happy; this thing will fill my soul; this thing will be my salvation; this thing is my god. And, therefore, I will sacrifice whatever else to that god to get it.”
1. And, in this case, the thing I'm sacrificing is . . . you.
- C. But what makes this so crazy is it's happening in the church.
1. I'm worshiping this false god even as I'm “worshiping” the true God.
 2. I'm bending my knee to Jesus, but I'm bending my heart to something else.
- D. I wonder, are you tempted to this yourself sometimes? To use the church, your Christianity, your influence for Jesus as a means of fleecing—getting something from others for yourself?

1. Paul is warning us here about this.
2. But more than that, he's showing us another way . . .

(2) A Call to Give (to others)

The Opposite Direction

- A. Paul goes on in vv. 34-35 to say: “³⁴You 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”
- B. Do you see how, for Paul, everything is moving in precisely the opposite direction?

Instead of Fleecing for Pennies . . .

- A. So, first, notice: Instead of fleecing those under his care for their gold and silver . . . he's giving his gold and silver away: “[T]hese hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me” (v. 34).
1. He's saying: “We didn't want to be a burden to you. We didn't want you thinking we were after your money. So I didn't take your money. And nobody in my crew (maybe Aquila, Priscilla, Timothy) took your money. I worked to provide for us. I was building tents (cf. Acts 18:3) and building the church. I was punching in for the first shift and the second shift. I was working both day and night. I'd rather shoulder the burden myself than shrug any of that burden onto you.”
 2. It's like what he says in 1 Thess. 2: “⁵[W]e never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness.⁶ Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. . . .⁹ For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God” (vv. 5-6, 9).
 3. Or how about what he says in 1 Cor. 9: “¹³Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings?¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (vv. 13-14). “Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ” (v. 12).
- B. Now, to be clear, in many places—and even in both texts I just read, if you noticed—Paul says that it is right and appropriate for a minister or a missionary to be supported financially by the people he's ministering to (cf. 1 Cor. 9:4, 7-15; Gal. 6:6; 1 Thess. 2:6; 2 Thess. 3:9; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; Matt. 10:9-10; Luke 8:1-3; 10:2-9).
1. Paul, in fact, would often receive financial help from other churches he had previous relationship with (2 Cor. 11:7-9; 12:13; Phil. 2:25; 4:14-18).

2. But, it does seem he made it a personal practice not to receive anything from those with whom he was immediately dealing, lest they say he's only there for their money and a hindrance be put between them and the gospel he's preaching.
 - a. So he's saying: "Listen, I'll work myself to the bone; I'll burden other churches that I have established relationship with; but I won't be a burden to you. I don't want your money. I want you to get the gospel!"

Instead of Fleecing for Praise . . .

- A. And now, second, notice: Instead of trying to fleece the sheep for their praise and admiration, instead of doing things to be seen like those religious folks Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount . . . what's Paul been up to? He's been caring for forgotten people in forgotten places.
 1. No one notices. No one sees.
 2. And that's just fine. Because that's not why he's doing it.
- B. So in [v. 35](#) he says: "[In all things I have shown you . . . we must help the weak . . .](#)"
 1. The "[weak](#)" are those people who for one reason or another can't help themselves.
 2. They are weak—perhaps in a physical sense, or an emotional sense, or a material sense.
- C. Whatever it may be, if they can't help themselves, it's our job and our joy to help them.
 1. We must go love on the vulnerable, the forgotten.
 2. We're caring for orphans and widows ([James 1:27](#); cf. [Gal. 2:10](#)), not devouring them.
 3. And we're doing it, not to be seen, but so that they'll feel seen—not just by us . . . but by God.

Instead of Fleecing for Power . . .

- A. And then, third, notice: Instead of trying to fleece the sheep for power and sense of control and the intoxicating feeling of being in charge . . . what is Paul doing? He's serving. He's working. He's pouring his life out.
 1. He's not high in some seat of authority, he's not sitting on a throne domineering over.
 2. He's down in the dirt.
- B. You saw that right? "[You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me](#)" ([v. 34](#)).
 1. You can imagine him literally holding up his hands at this point. These are not hands of a man who sees the sweat and grime of real work as somehow beneath him. Nothing is too low for him.
 - a. As I often put it: True Christian leaders ought to be the first to the floor. They lead from down low.
 - b. It's as Jesus says in [Matt. 23:11](#): "[The greatest among you shall be your servant.](#)"

2. “Look at the blisters and the callouses. I didn’t get that from holding a scepter. I got it from holding a mallet and a shovel or whatever else was needed. Every crease and crack tells a story of servitude. I’m not trying to lord it over you, I’m trying to serve you. I’m working hard for you.”
3. “In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak . . .” (v. 35).
 - a. The original Greek word translated “working hard” here literally means “to become weary or tired” (BDAG).
 - b. “I would rather exhaust myself than exploit you in any way.
 - c. This isn’t a power grab. Whatever power I do have I want to use to help you.”

The Issue Beneath the Issue: Jesus!

- A. Now, I just want to stop right here and ask: Where in the world does this come from? How do you go from exploiting, manipulating, looking out for your own gain . . . to this?
 1. As we saw, when we ask this question under the first point—where does this come from, the craving to get from others?—the answer is: underneath it all, it’s ultimately from idolatry.
 2. But now as we’re asking this question under our second point—where does this come from, the service, the self-sacrifice?—the answer is, as you might expect: it’s from Jesus.
 - a. He’s the one who gets this turning in the heart of a man or a woman.
 - b. He’s the one who blazed the trail—ahead of Paul, ahead of us.
 - c. He’s the one who could have come fleecing for pennies and praise and power—he’s the only one really worthy of all of it, with the divine prerogative to demand as such—but instead he chose to pour himself out in love for us, to death, on that cross.
- B. It starts with him.
 1. In this text, yes, Paul is recalling his own example and holding it up as something to follow.
 2. But let’s not forget how he fleshes it out more fully for us in [1 Cor. 11:1](#) when he writes: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”
 - a. In other words: The only reason I can live this way, the only reason you can live this way, is because Christ has already lived this way . . . for us!
 - b. [2 Cor. 8:9](#): “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”
 - c. [Rom. 5:6](#): “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”
 - d. [Phil. 2:6-8](#): “⁶ [T]hough he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

C. He's a different kind of shepherd.

1. He doesn't fleece the sheep. He feeds the sheep.
2. And more than that, he lays his life down for the sheep: “¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . .²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:10-11, 28).

D. And when we get the kind of Shepherd that he is and the kind of security we now have in him, listen to me: it makes us different kind of leaders and influencers and shepherds as well.

Coming Full Circle

A. I think it all comes full circle for us with what Jesus says to his disciples in [Luke 12:32-34](#): “³²Fear not, little flock [the Good Shepherd is addressing his sheep here], for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. [In other words: He loves you, he has you, you are secure in him eternally because of my sacrifice. Therefore, what? . . .]³³Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.³⁴ For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

1. Don't you see? The love of God for us in Jesus is what breaks our hearts free from the “love of money” or anything else. This is what snaps the cord of covetousness.
 - a. That's the context of [Luke 12](#) actually. Jesus is saying all this as elaboration on what he said back up in [v. 15](#): “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness . . .”
 - b. Well, how do you take care and be on your guard against this? You see Jesus and all that is now freely yours because of the cross.
 - i. We don't need the pennies, or the praise, or the power. We have him.

B. It seems to me that this is the connection that makes sense of that initially jarring transition between [Acts 20:32](#) and [33](#) that I mentioned earlier.

1. What was Paul talking about in [v. 32](#)? God's invincible care for us. The word of his grace that's able to build us up and give us what?
2. An “inheritance”—which we know from Paul's other writings is a reference, not just to eternal life or salvation in general, but to the kingdom of God in particular ([1 Cor. 6:9-10](#); [Gal. 5:21](#); [Eph. 5:5](#); [Col. 1:12-13](#); cf. [Matt. 25:34](#)).
 - a. You will inherit the kingdom. It's your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.
3. Therefore, don't fear; don't hoard; don't covet gold and silver and apparel; don't use your ministry and your influence to fleece the sheep.
4. Instead, give; serve; lay your life down in love for God and others . . . as Christ has for you.

C. And that leads the third and final thing I wanted to bring out here real quick . . .

(3) A Blessing in Disguise

How Is This True?!

A. Look at the last part of [v. 35](#) now. Paul goes on to ground everything he's been talking about to this point in the words of Jesus: [“and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed \[or in the Gk. ‘happy’\] to give than to receive.’”](#)

B. And I just want to know: How is that true? Do you feel that way? More blessed when you give than when you receive? I struggle with that.

1. How do you feel about people and relationships where you give and give and give and you never get anything back in return?

- a. I'd wager you're not usually feeling blessed.
- b. You're feeling taken advantage of, you're frustrated, embittered.

2. And yet, in [Luke 14](#), Jesus says explicitly: [“When you're throwing a dinner party, ‘¹² do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.¹³ But \[instead\] . . . invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you” \(vv. 12-14\).](#)

- a. What?! Again, how can this be true? In what way is this true?

C. Well, I think it comes down to the question of where true happiness or blessedness is found. What is it that can actually fill, satisfy, enthrall the human heart?

1. Is it more stuff of this world? We think so. We go after it like it is the answer, and it may excite us for a moment, but it never lasts. It's drinking water from a broken cistern.

2. Don't you see? We were created for God, for relationship with him, and therefore the greater happiness, the greater blessing is found wherever he is found.

- a. And our God is the God of the cross.
- b. He's found in the dirt—serving, giving, pouring out his life in love for others.

3. As we follow him in that we experience more of him. And as we experience more of him we get more blessing, more joy—both now and forever!

D. I think this is precisely what Jesus is trying to get at in his discussion with the rich young ruler.

1. The guy wants eternal life. And do you remember what Jesus says to him? [“One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” \(Luke 18:22\).](#)

- a. "You're holding onto your stuff like it's going to make you happy."
 - i. But, as we see in the very next verse, it just makes him sad. He goes away sad.
 - ii. His stuff ultimately becomes the source of his grief. It's not giving him joy, it's robbing him of joy.
- b. "Let go of it," Jesus says. "Give it away to those in need. And lay hold of me. '[C]ome, follow me.' You'll get me now . . . and even more of me later in the kingdom of 'heaven.'"

E. You don't need to fleece the sheep when you have the Good Shepherd!