



Influencers

Acts 21:17-22:21

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Hello, everyone, thanks for being here. It's good to see all of you here. It always makes me happy when you're here, so thank you for being here.

The creation of social media gave birth to an entirely new kind of career, the influencer. An influencer is someone who companies pay to fly their airlines or stay in their hotels and then post about it on social media to influence other people to buy that company's product.

And the first time I heard about this job, I had the same reaction that a little kid had to me a couple of years ago. I was out in the lobby, and this little five-year-old boy walked up to me and said, "Hey you, why are you always here?" I said, "Well, it's my job. I preach sermons and I help lead the church," and he laughed and said, "No, that's not a job."

When I first heard about influencers, that was my reaction. "No, that's not a job." But it is. People get paid a lot of money to be influencers. It is a job. It's also, though, something that all of us are. All of us are influencers. We have friends, family, fellow students, coworkers, neighbors that we influence every day by what we say and by what we do and how we live.

Something as simple as being with a group of people who are talking badly about someone else and you say something positive about that person and turn the conversation from negative to positive, that's influence. And Jesus calls us to use the influence that we have to help people know him and to heal what is broken in our world. And there are a lot of things broken in our world. So we need a lot more healers.

Jesus calls us to use our influence to make more healers. But that requires sacrifice. Because no matter how graciously we do that, sometimes people may think less of us for following Jesus. They may make fun of us, maybe even get mad at us.

I think one of the biggest things that holds us back at work or school or in our neighborhood, one of the biggest things that holds us back from talking about Jesus or working to bring his healing and justice wherever we live, work, play, or learn, one of the biggest things that maybe stops us from trying to address something that's unfair at school or in our workplace or talk about Jesus with our friends is the thought, "But what will people think of me if I say that or do that?" What will they think?

So it requires sacrifice. But as we've been saying throughout this entire sermon series, sacrificial living is not deprivation. It's letting go of something, often a good thing, so that we experience God's better thing. It's not loss, it's gain.

And the better thing I gain when I let go of worrying about what other people think about me, my image management, my reputation, and use my influence to point to Jesus, is freedom from the fears and worries about what other people think of me. And I get to be part of healing what is broken in our world, which is so rewarding.

We see that in today's scripture, which comes from Acts chapter 21. The Apostle Paul has been going around the Mediterranean world, telling people about Jesus, starting churches, and now he's coming back to Jerusalem, but not everybody is happy to see him. His friends say to him, "The people in Jerusalem have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs."

Okay, that's not true. All Paul has said is that those religious rituals do not forgive our sins and reconcile us to God. Jesus' death on the cross does that, but there's this false rumor. So his friends say, "Do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow, join in their purification rights and pay their expenses. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law."

In other words, his friends say, "Participate in this Jewish purification ritual to show respect for Jewish culture," which Paul agrees to do. Because one of the key principles of using our influence to help people see the real Jesus is to go out of our way to be gracious, which is what Paul's doing here. He doesn't have to do these rituals, he's doing it to show that he cares about Jewish culture.

Go out of our way to be gracious. Now, I need to say gracious does not mean wimp, okay? It does not mean that we aren't bold. We are called to be bold, we are called to be brave, but there's a difference between being bold and being a bully.

I see a lot of Christians these days behaving as bullies, screaming about how, quote, "our rights as Christians are being violated," or trying to force everyone to live the way we do through legislation, which is an impulse I see across the political spectrum, left to right. Paul doesn't do that. He's bold and gracious.

He goes as far as he can to accommodate a culture that does not believe in Jesus. There's a man I know about who works in finance, and his partners wanted to invest in a company, part of whose business was in the pornography industry. And this man wanted to live out his Christian principles at work, so he tried his best to persuade his partners not to invest in something so destructive as pornography.

But they disagreed because there was a lot of money to be made. So after praying about it, he said to his partners, "Look, I don't think this is good for us as a company in the long run, but if you guys really want to do this, I won't get in the way. However, I don't want one penny of the profit to go to me."

And that forced a crisis of conscience in his partners far greater than if he'd lectured them about what terrible people they are. And they ended up not investing in that company because of that. As a result, less money went to the pornography industry, which is one step toward healing something very broken in our world.

He was bold, but not a bully. He didn't shame them. He didn't try to make them bear the cost of his faith. He bore that himself. We're not called to be persecutors. We're called to be persuaders, influencers.

The text goes on. Some Jews—Jews here just means Israelites—stirred up the whole crowd and seized Paul, shouting, "He has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled his holy place." They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple. To bring a non-Jew into the temple was against Jewish law. Paul hadn't done it; people just assumed he had.

Anyone ever assume something about you that isn't true and spread that around? Doesn't feel very good, does it? What this shows is no matter how gracious we are in pointing to Jesus and trying to heal what's broken in our world, some people won't like it. They may even spread false rumors about it as they do to Paul here.

While they were trying to kill Paul, the crowd was trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. So, there's a riot going on, because in saying that only Jesus saves us, Paul is coming up against traditions and systems and vested interests.

No matter how graciously we do it, if we challenge an unethical decision at work, some people may not like it, because we are coming up against their vested financial interests. If we work for racial justice, if we are open about our faith in Jesus, we will upset traditions, interests, powers, and systems.

But again, if we are upsetting people, let's make sure it's not because we are behaving like jerks, but because we are just actually following Jesus. So the army commander shows up with some troops to quiet down this riot that's going on about Paul.

Paul asks the commander, "May I say something to you?" "Do you speak Greek?" he replied. Paul answered, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people." After receiving the commander's permission, Paul motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic.

So here's one kind of influence right here. Use our social status to help people see the real Jesus, which Paul is doing right here.

He speaks Greek to the commander. Greek was the language of the educated. So, when hearing Greek, it meant that Paul was someone to be listened to. He uses it not to show off his knowledge of Greek, but to convince people to listen to him about Jesus.

He says he's from Tarsus, no ordinary city. Tarsus was a very wealthy city. It was one of three cities in the entire Roman Empire where you could get what we would call an Ivy League education. And then, when he addresses the crowd, he doesn't use Greek, he uses Aramaic, because that was the language of the common people.

All of these things give him social credibility, which he uses not to make himself look good, but to get people to listen to him about Jesus. Many of us have some kind of social credibility. You're wealthy, or highly educated, or have a job that is considered impressive, or you're good looking, because that's a thing—pretty privilege, right?

Multiple studies show people listen more closely to good looking people than other kinds of people, which as a preacher is just so discouraging. Like seriously, y'all would listen to me better if I had all my hair and looked like Brad Pitt. That's just so discouraging, so depressing.

All of those things are social capital, influence that you can use not to further your own reputation, but to show people the real Jesus. There's a young guy in our church, he's in his twenties. I'll call him Tom. He's part of our church, played football in college, tall, good-looking guy.

A while back, he was at his gym, and a guy said to him, "You're Tom, right? I've been wanting to see you. You said something to me a year ago that changed my life. You said casually in conversation, 'I need Jesus every day.' After that, I kept thinking, why would a young, fit, good-looking guy need Jesus every day? And that sort of got me searching, and I went to church, and I ended up becoming a follower of Jesus. I've always had a really hard time forgiving my dad for some stuff, but now Jesus is helping me forgive my dad, and we're having a better relationship."

Without even knowing it, Tom used his social credibility, his spiritual gift of cool, in a way that made this guy listen, and ended up as a follower of Jesus, who now has a better relationship with his dad. That's influence. And for a year, Tom didn't even know he'd

done it. And maybe never would have known he'd done it if he hadn't just run into this guy by accident.

Because sometimes we're not aware of the impact our influence is having on people, but it is having an impact. There's something else in these verses that I just read, that you could skip right over. It says that Paul motioned to the crowd to silence them. That was almost certainly a particular kind of hand motion that orators would use in that culture to get the crowd to be silent so that they could speak.

Orators in that culture were the social media of their day. Orators were how ideas and news and opinions were shared, right? Which is another kind of influence that we have. Use the influence of social media to point to Jesus.

I was gone the last couple of weeks because my wife and I took our daughters to Italy, but my son didn't want to come, so he didn't. But that caused some confusion for people. My wife at one point posted a picture of us and our two daughters by the Grand Canal in Venice, and one person said in the comments, "And the boy is in the canal?" No, he just didn't want to come.

When we were there in Italy, we spent hours, hours, as our daughters took pictures of each other to post on social media, which may be why our son didn't come, because he knew that that was going to happen. My oldest daughter would flip through the ones of her, and she'd say, "No, no, no, that one's not going to work, that one's not going to work." I'd point to one and say, "Oh, this one looks good." And she'd say, "No, no, no, the color palette is all wrong." And I was like, "The background is Venice. How can that be wrong?"

But some of you right now are fully tracking with my daughter. And you're like, in social media, Dudley, the color palette is really important. Good for you. You can do what I can't do. Use your social media savvy to point to Jesus and to help heal what's broken in our world. Some of you can do that, and I can't.

Paul continues, and he says to the crowd, "I am a Jew." In other words, "I am one of you. I'm like you," because that's another form of influence—the things we have in common with someone. "I studied under Gamaliel." Gamaliel was the most prestigious teacher of his day. This is like I studied at Harvard. But Paul isn't name-dropping here. He's using another form of social capital, and of influence—our connections, the people we know. That's influence.

So, for instance, many of the people in our New Hope community, they have professional degrees, they're accountants, they're lawyers, stuff like that. But because licensing is different here than it is in Africa, they can't use those skills, and they have a hard time finding meaningful work. So maybe you know someone who is hiring, and you can use your connections to connect a person looking for a job with someone who's hiring for a job. That's using your influence to bring Jesus healing.

Just being in relationship with people is using your influence to bring healing, because relationship is healing. Paul goes on. He says, "I persecuted the followers of the Way." That means Christians to their death, which at the time, he thought he was doing the right thing. But now that he knows Jesus, he realizes that was a failure. That was a weakness. That was a sin.

Which is another kind of influence we have—your failures and your weaknesses. So if you've been going through this whole sermon thinking, "I don't have any of the kinds of influence that Dudley is talking about," good news, now you have some influence. Have you ever failed? Do you have some weaknesses? Those are influences.

See, we think we will be loved for our strength. For our strengths. It's not true. At best, we are admired for our strengths. More often than not, we are resented for them. Where we really connect as humans is around our failures and our weaknesses.

My friend Tom at the gym, he did not say to that man, "You need Jesus every day." He said, "I need Jesus every day." That was not a statement of his strength, it was a statement of his weakness. The person who struggles with an addiction can influence other people with an addiction. A person who has low self-esteem can influence another person with low self-esteem to see the real Jesus—our failures and our weaknesses. Influence.

Paul goes on, "I went to Damascus to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. About noon, a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground, and I heard a voice say to me, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'"

"Who are you, Lord?" I asked.

"I am Jesus of Nazareth," which is another kind of influence. Speak the name of Jesus, which Paul does here, as he starts to tell his conversion story, which he goes on and finishes, to tell how he became a Christian. Not God, because God can mean anything in our culture. The name of Jesus has influence; the name of Jesus has power.

I've shared with some of you before that when I was a PhD student, and later an instructor at Stanford, which is a very hostile environment for Christianity—like there can be no more hostile environment in the Stanford English Department toward Christians—but I was open about my relationship with Jesus, and I tried to be both bold and gracious.

So, for instance, my advisor was an atheist.

His father had worked with Sigmund Freud. Okay, that's the world he came from.

But from time to time, when it seemed right, I would speak the name of Jesus to him.

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So, for instance, one time after his mother died, he got back from her funeral, and I asked him how he was doing, because I knew no one else in the English Department would ask him how he was doing. The collective emotional intelligence in that department was just that above a garden slug.

So, I knew I'd be the only one, so I asked him, "How are you doing after your mom's funeral?"

And he said, "Her funeral was so depressing. There was just like no hope in it. How do people find hope in times like this?"

And I said, "Oh, Stephen, I am so disappointed in you right now. Do you really want to make it that easy for me? Like this is the tea ball of evangelism. It's Jesus, Stephen, it's Jesus."

And he laughed and said, "I guess I walked right into that one."

I said, "You so walked into that." I was open about Jesus and never offended anyone. For the most part, people respected me. However, there were a few people who would make fun of me.

One of my colleagues would call me "Bible Boy" to make fun of me. One professor once said to me, "You are an embarrassment to Stanford. I am embarrassed that you are here because I was a Christian."

But I also know that I changed some people's perceptions of who Jesus is.

Social standing, social media, connections, our weaknesses and failures, the name of Jesus—these are all forms of influence that we have. There are others as well—our jobs, our talents, our stories. Paul is about to tell his conversion story. We are not going to read it, but he goes on to tell his conversion story. All of those things are ways we can influence others.

And Jesus calls us to use the influence we have to help people see the real Jesus and to partner with him in healing this world. And that takes courage. And that takes boldness. And that takes graciousness. And it requires that we let go of worrying about what other people might think of us so that we experience the better things God wants to give us.

Three better things in particular.

First, when we do this, we get God's approval. At the end of this story, Paul gets put in prison, and the text says the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage." The Lord stood near to Paul. There's a closeness to Jesus that comes when we let go of our reputation and point the way to him, show people who he is. He stands near to us, and we feel his love and his approval, and that's what gives us the courage to keep pointing to Jesus and live sacrificially for him.

The second better thing we get is freedom from worrying all the time about what other people might think of us. I've got to get into the best college so I can get the best sounding job. Am I thin enough? Am I tall enough? Am I good looking enough? Am I too young? Am I too old? Am I educated enough? Am I successful enough to get people to like me?

That's a prison. And the more we experience God's love and approval of us, the less we worry about what other people think. And instead of living our lives as though we are in an arena of people waiting to either cheer us or jeer at us, we begin to live our life to an audience of one, God. And that is so freeing.

The third better thing we get is we make a difference because we connect people to the God who loved them enough to die for them, and through his power, heal what is broken in our world, which is so deeply rewarding.

And so many of you are doing this—using your influence to show people Jesus. So many of you are doing this at work, with your neighbors, or with your families, middle school students, high school students, college students, who are open about their faith at school.

You guys, here in this front row, do you know how much courage that takes to be open about your faith at school these days? So brave, so brave. Well done, well done, because that's hard to do.

Well, the action step for this week is to prepare. Because next week and the next few weeks after that, we're going to give all of us a chance to write down on a card the better thing that we think God is wanting to give us and then the thing that we need to let go of in order to receive it.

Then you'll turn those cards in with your address, and you don't need to include your name if you don't want to, but include your address, because later this year, we're going to mail those cards back to you to remind you of what you committed to.

Maybe it's to let go of some of the activities on your calendar, so you'll have more time for faith, family, and friends. Maybe it's to let go of a recurring sin, so you can live a healthier life. And if it gets real personal like that, you don't necessarily have to write it down. You can just write down one word, an initial, or some kind of code word.

That's next week. So for this week, prepare by praying this prayer: asking God, "Lord, what's the better thing you're trying to give me, and what do I need to let go of to receive it?"

And maybe it's what we talked about today. Letting go of reputation, worrying about what other people are thinking of us, to use our influence to point people to Jesus, so that we gain the freedom from trying to please everyone all the time and gain the joy of making a difference in this world.

And yes, it can be hard to do. Being open about my faith at Stanford cost me. Some people, some folks, thought less of me because of it. I knew for certain that there would be some universities that wouldn't hire me as a professor because of it, but it brought me closer to Jesus.

And I know I changed some people's perceptions of who he is, but more importantly, it's the kind of person I want to be. I don't want to be a slave to what other people think of me. I don't want to be that weak. I don't want to be that afraid. I want to be someone with the courage to graciously and boldly point people to my Savior and my Lord who has changed my life and can change anybody's life for the better and be part of healing what's broken in our world through his power, because he is our only hope.

I am not ashamed of the gospel. And that's the kind of person I want to be, even if it costs me some of my reputation, and even if some people don't like me because of it.

There's a poem by a man named Charles Mackay that says, "You have no enemies, you say. Alas, my friend, the boast is poor. He or she who has mingled in the fray of duty that the brave endure must have made foes. If you have none, then small is the work that you have done. You have hit no trader on the hip, dashed no cup from perjured lip. You have never turned the wrong to right. You have been a coward in the fight."

Jesus, may that never be true of me, please. May that never be true of me. May that never be true of us.

Lord, give us the courage to boldly and graciously use our influence to help people experience you. And to work for your justice and love and healing in our world. Make us people who make you look good, so the whole world will know that you alone are God, you alone are Lord, and you alone save. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How do you decide when to bend to accommodate others and when to stand for your principles? (see 21:17-26)
- How does Paul's use of language and the content of his speech force people to listen? What does he hope to accomplish in this speech and how does he try to accomplish it?
- Paul had all the things required in his culture to win the approval of others (education, social standing, Roman citizenship, etc.), but he sacrifices it all in order to point people to Jesus. When have you been willing to let go of what others might think of you in order to point people to Jesus?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.