

“The Stewardship of Influence” - Part 1

Jeremiah 15:15-21 November 1, 2009

Everything we have is a gift from God - our health, life, salvation, freedom, friends, family, and even the opportunities that lie before us. Even the things we work for in life, we wouldn't have if God didn't give us the ability to work for them. So everything in our life is a gift from God. And our Lord has some expectations about those gifts. He expects us to make the most of them. The Bible calls it STEWARDSHIP. Some people think stewardship means money. No! Stewardship is the Old English word for “management.” So when we talk about stewardship, we're talking about the management of our life. This month we are going to talk about stewardship, and we begin with something you may not have considered, that is, the stewardship of influence.

God expects us to use our influence to help others. But what is influence? One thing it is not is fame. You could be very famous and still not be very influential. There are a lot of celebrities who are well known but nobody cares what they think. They would be amazed to discover that, but it is the truth. And influence is not wealth either. Don't confuse influence with affluence. You can have a lot of money and still not have any influence. According to Webster, influence is the capacity or power to affect how someone develops, acts, or thinks. And God expects us to exert our influence on those around us.

Now there are many who don't want to think that they have that sort of power. In fact, they just don't want it. But we should want to be influential. After all, much of the world wants to influence us to buy this product, support this candidate, or think this way. But we have something better, for we have the Word of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And Jesus commands us to use our influence for good in the world. We weren't created just to live for ourselves. We are to be a light shining on a hill, a light shining into the darkness that often surrounds us. We are to be a positive influence on the world. Someday we're going to give an account to God of how well we influenced others, for good and for God. We will be evaluated on how well we listened to Jesus when he said, *“Let your light shine so that others will see the good that you do and will praise your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16). Jesus said, don't waste your influence. Don't buy a lamp and then hide it. Don't get a light bulb and then just keep it in the box. I have given you influence, and I want you to let that light shine.

Or look to Matthew 5:13: *“You are like salt for the whole human race.”* Why does God want us to be the salt of the earth? Because salt does three things: it seasons, it improves the taste, and it preserves. And those are the very things that God wants us to do in this culture. He wants us to improve the world and preserve it. God doesn't want the world to spoil or rot. He wants us to use our influence to season it, to improve it, and to preserve it. He wants us to use our influence on the world and in the world. It is said quite clearly in Jeremiah 15:19: *“You are to influence them. Do not let them influence you.”* Sadly, much of the Church Universal has gone the other way. We are influenced far more by the world than we are influencing the world. The world influences how we think, dress, act, sleep, talk, work, laugh, and on and on. God doesn't want us to be a thermometer, which simply records the heat of the culture. We are to be the thermostat that controls the heat of the culture. We are meant to be an influential force in the world.

How can we become influential people for good and for God? Three things. The first two we will begin to look at this week, and then we will continue next week. We take the time because it is an important issue. After all, there are enough bad influences in the world. We need a bunch of good ones. And we can be those influences. And it starts here:

1. I MUST RECOGNIZE MY INFLUENCE.

Everybody has influence, usually more than they realize. But most people don't think about it and so they are unaware of it. You say, "Who do I influence?" Everybody you come in contact with. Your family. Your friends. Your neighbors. The people you go to school with or work with. You influence your boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife. You influence the people you hang out with, including the soccer and football teams and the support people around them. Each of us has influence on those around us. As a matter of fact, after you leave here today, you could make or break the day of the clerk in the store, or the waitress at the restaurant. You can influence the sales people who contact you. You can influence the person in the pew beside you, or the ushers, and the mail carriers, the barbers and the bankers, the medical workers and the media, the office workers and web designers. We have the potential to influence everyone we touch, and everyone who touches us. Every time we send an email or write a note, every time we make a call or send a text message, we are influencing someone. We are even being influential every time we gossip. The issue is not if we are influential or not. The question is, what kind of an influence are we? For good? For bad? For right or wrong? For Christ? Against Christ? What kind of influence are you?

God's desire is that we recognize our influence, and intentionally seek ways to use that influence. Galatians 6:4 *"Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given. Then sink yourself into that."* Know who you are and what you are doing and then do it the best that you can. Be a good influence. Think about your interests. What kind of person am I and how can I use that to influence others? Think about your job, your career. What do I do and how could I use that influence? How should I use the best of my abilities to be a positive influence.

Remember Moses? Moses was a murderer on the run. A criminal. A fugitive. He was running from Pharaoh, and he was running from God. God used a burning bush to get his attention, and then in Exodus 4:2, we hear this exchange: *"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'What is in your hand?' 'A staff,' he replied. God said, 'Throw it on the ground.'"* Now have you ever wondered why God asked him what was in his hand? Didn't He know what a staff was? Of course He did. But it is not really about the staff, but about what that staff represents. You see, Moses was then a shepherd, and that staff represented just who Moses was. Now in the hand of Moses that staff was just a big useful stick. But at the command of God, when he threw the staff down, it became alive. It was filled with power. Cool trick. But what's cooler is what it tells us.

The Lord said to Moses, "If you will give me your influence, your identity, I will empower it. I will make it come alive. I'll do miraculous things with it." From that moment on, because he put his identity into the hand of God, Moses went on to lead the people out of slavery and to the edge of the promised land. Miraculous things did indeed happen. History was changed because God used Moses to influence for good and for God. And this morning, God asks you

and me the very same question, “What is in your hand?” Give Me your identity and influence, give Me your talents and abilities, give Me your contacts and networks, give Me your intellect and your relationships, and I will turn them into the rod of God. I will do miracles and I will do wonderful things through you. And together we will influence and change history.” It can happen. It will happen. That is the promise that comes from the Lord. But first, we have to recognize our influence. And then ...

2. I MUST EXERCISE MY INFLUENCE

Influence is like a muscle. You either use it or lose it. So I’ve got to exercise it. I’ve got to use the influence that God has given me. Again, most of us have far more influence than we ever imagined. We can have a far greater impact than we ever thought possible. And that can happen simply by being a little more intentional about using our influence. In fact, there are five actions we can follow to help increase our influence. We are not able to get to all of them today, but here are some, starting with the easy stuff, that can help us influence the people and the world around us. So how can I increase my influence?

1. By Smiling at People.

Just start real simple. We influence people by smiling at them. When we smile what happens? Others smile back. When they smile back that means you just influenced them. They did something they wouldn’t have done because you made the choice to smile at them. There’s just something about the smallest kind word, the simplest smile, that can make a difference in somebody’s day. Sometimes it can turn their whole day around.

Proverbs 15:30 *“A cheerful look brings joy to the heart.”* Smiles bring joy to your heart. But it also brings joy to the heart of the people you’re smiling at. You’ve influenced them. It’s a simple way we can all exercise our influence. And the second way we can exercise our influence is

2. By Sympathizing with People

Showing emotional support, showing that we care about people influences them. One of the most influential guys in the early days of the church was Joseph from Cyprus. He was the one who talked the leaders into giving Paul a chance after his conversion. He was the one who gave John Mark a second chance after he had given up on his first missionary journey. It was John Mark who later wrote the first gospel record. Leaders of the early church looked and listened to Joseph of Cyprus. And yet most of us don’t recognize the name. We know him by his nickname, Barnabus, which means, “Son of Encouragement.” You see, he was always supporting others, showing that he cared by encouraging them. That’s what enabled him to befriend Paul of Tarsus when everyone else was turning away from him. And Paul probably had Barnabus in mind when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:4, *“God comforts us so that when others have trouble we can comfort them with the same comfort that God gives us.”*

That is not only a biblical principle, but a principle that we have all experienced at some time, at many times within our life. God has comforted us and it is not only for our sake. The Lord comforts us so we can comfort others. There’s something about sympathy, letting other people know that we care about what they’re going through that opens the door to influence. I care about people that care about me. I care about what they think, what their ideas are. The fact that they care about me makes me want to listen to them. It opens the door for influence

in life. That's what sympathy is all about. If you're like me there are a lot of people you care about but you never let them know. Sympathizing is doing something about it. Not just caring, but writing a note or saying a kind word or stopping by to see them, to let them know that "I care about what you're going through." That's a powerful way to influence people with your life. We influence people by smiling at them, by sympathizing with them and a third way is ...

3. By Serving People.

Now it is easy to smile, and pretty easy to sympathize, but serving requires a little more effort. But like it is with so many other things, the more effort we put into it, the more influence we can develop from it. In God's economy the greater we serve someone, the greater influence we have in their life. The more we serve others, the more influence we'll have.

In 1 Corinthians 9:19, we read, *"Even though I'm free of the expectations of everyone I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people."* Paul says, "I serve other people so I can influence them. I serve them so I can tell them about God and teach them to do good." That's why Jesus said, *"If you want to be great, learn to be the servant of all."* If we serve a few people, we're going to have a little influence. If we serve no one, we will have no influence. But if we serve a lot of people, we're going to have great influence on a whole lot of people. It's all dependent upon how many people we serve and how well we serve.

We have a choice in life, whether we want to impress people or influence them. Most people choose to impress because it is easier, and it can be done from a distant. You really don't have to expose yourself nearly as much. We see a performer on the stage and say, "That's impressive." But we influence them by getting Aup close and personal." We allow ourselves to be exposed and vulnerable, where they can see us warts and all; where they can see our faults, our frailties, our weaknesses. And that is never an easy thing to do. But we have to do it if we want to be a positive influence on them. We've got to get Aup close" and serve them.

One place where we have influenced people is through Sunbeam Station. It's not the only way in which we have influenced others, but Sunbeam has been effective. Why? Because parents have discovered that we have provided a place where people care about their children. They know that when their kids show up, we smile at them. We have shown that we care about them by serving them. Our teachers and aids get close and personal. And those actions, smiling, caring, and serving, have touched lives and hearts for the better. We haven't touched the heart of everyone who has been through Sunbeam. But by caring for children we have influenced parents and families. And as we continue to influence families, our influence grows until all the community is changed. That happens because of the influence of Sunbeam and this congregation; because of your influence.

There is more that we can do; more that we will do if we learn to exercise our influence. We can do that by things like smiling and caring. We can exhibit even more influence by serving the community around us. And there are more things that I will lift up next week. But as we go into this week may we acknowledge the influence that we do have. And may we intentionally begin to exercise that influence so that this world might be changed for the better, for good and for God, so that this world might come a little closer to the kingdom of God. In your life may it be so. Amen.