

Spiritual Influence

Romans 1:8-17

This morning we are going to talk about influencing others spiritually: saying and doing things that will help others come to Christ and then grow in their relationship with Christ. I realize that we're probably in many different places on this issue. Some of you are passionate about sharing your faith and making disciples. Others of you think, "I have no business trying to influence others spiritually. I need to focus on my own spiritual health and not that of others." Most of us are probably somewhere in between.

Wherever you are along that spectrum, I'd like for you to consider the possibility that there are already people in your life right now that you might influence spiritually. Perhaps you've never allowed yourself to entertain the possibility that God could use you in the lives of others spiritually. But I'd invite you to think with me today about how you might influence family members, friends, acquaintances, co-workers, and even others in the body of Christ.

Today as we continue our study in the book of Romans, we are going to see how Paul describes his ambition to have spiritual influence in the lives of the Romans. Paul basically tells them, "I hope to travel to Rome and have a lasting spiritual impact in your lives." There's nothing timid or tentative about his desire to influence the Romans spiritually.

Even though Paul's calling as an apostle was unique, his thinking reflects the mind of Christ for all of us. His thinking gives us a vision for how we can and should think about influencing others spiritually. As we work our way through this passage this morning, bring to mind a person or two (or maybe a group of people) you hope to influence spiritually.

The Desire to Influence Others Spiritually (Romans 1:8-15) In verses 8 through 15 Paul talks about his desire to influence the Romans for Christ.

Thanksgiving: "I thank God for you all. . ." (Romans 1:8) In verse 8 Paul expresses that he was already thankful for their lives and their testimony around the world. In this way he was acknowledging that any influence he might have would build upon the foundation of others (see Romans 15:20 for Paul's reluctance to build on another's foundation).

8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Having a body of believers in the capital city was significant. Word had spread among the churches across the Roman Empire that there was a church in Rome. Here Paul mentions that their "**faith** is being proclaimed"; in 16:19 Paul mentions that "the report of your **obedience** has reached to all." Last week we discussed how Paul's mission was to bring about "the obedience of faith" among the Gentiles. The Romans' faith was already producing obedience. For that Paul thanked God.

Expressions of thanksgiving show up in almost every letter Paul wrote to various people and churches. In the same way, you and I need to be full of thanksgiving for the people we might influence. This doesn't mean that you LOVE everything about the way they're living their lives, but it does mean that you're thankful for them and for the opportunity to be part of their lives. Instead of being apathetic or embittered toward someone, you're thankful. If you're not thankful for someone, it's unlikely that you're motivated to influence him/her spiritually. God knows whether or not you're thankful, and they probably know as well.

Prayer (petition): “. . .unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request. . .” (Romans 1:9-10) As well, Paul prayed for the Romans.

9 For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, 10 always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.

When Paul writes that “God is his witness” he’s emphasizing the truth of what he’s saying. God Himself would back up the claim that Paul consistently prayed for the Romans. Paul doesn’t say exactly what he prayed for them. But surely he prayed for their spiritual health and protection and influence.

Prayer is one of the core ways that you can influence another person. We don’t understand **how** prayer works, and we don’t really need to. But throughout Scripture we are told that the God of heaven hears the prayers of people on earth and responds in wisdom. God wants us to want what He wants - so much so that we pour out our petitions to Him. In this way we pray according to the will of God. And so prayer isn’t primarily an obligation (something we HAVE to do); it’s primarily a gift and an invitation. Through prayer you and I ask God to accomplish His purposes in the lives of the people we care about.

Direct investment: “. . .so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you. . .” (Romans 1:11-15) In verses 11 through 15 Paul expresses his longing to travel to Rome and make a direct, in-person investment in their lives.

11 For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; 12 that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine.

When Paul speaks of “impart[ing] some spiritual gift” to the Romans, he probably isn’t talking about the gifts of the Spirit he describes in chapter 12 such as prophecy, service, teaching, etc. Those spiritual gifts are always said to be given sovereignly by God (1 Corinthians 12:7). But *Paul* could give another type of spiritual gift through his influence: **spiritual** because it was empowered by the Holy Spirit and a **gift** because it was freely given. This spiritual gift would help establish them in their faith so that they would stand strong.

Even though Paul was an apostle and was spiritually mature, he anticipated that his time with the Romans would be a time of **mutual** encouragement. Encouragement doesn't only flow downhill from the more mature to everybody else. There is a mutual encouragement between believers even when there's great disparity between their spiritual maturity. You should experience mutual encouragement with those you seek to influence spiritually.

Paul wanted the Romans to understand that the reason he hadn't yet visited them wasn't due to lack of effort or desire. In verses 13 through 15 he writes this:

13 I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. 14 I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. 15 So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

When Paul speaks about "preaching the gospel to you who are in Rome," he is probably referring both to the believers receiving his letter as well as to others in Rome who hadn't yet believed. We'll see as we study through Romans that on the one hand the gospel is a very simple message about Jesus dying as our substitute. But on the other hand we'll see that the gospel contains an inexhaustible supply of nourishment for the believer's walk with God. We never get to the point where we no longer need to ponder and internalize the implications of the gospel.

When I look at verses 8-15 I'm struck by the way that Paul unashamedly tells the Romans, "I thank God for you. I pray unceasingly for you. And I want to show up in person and bear fruit among you, preaching the gospel to you who are in Rome." I'm challenged by Paul's example to care so deeply about family members, friends, and others that my thinking spills over into thanksgiving and prayer and that I am eager to be used by God personally in their lives.

The Power to Influence others Spiritually (Romans 1:16-17) In verses 16 and 17 Paul lays out his conviction about the power of the gospel he preached. This conviction is at the heart of the book of Romans. After saying in verse 15 that he was eager to preach the gospel to those who are in Rome, Paul writes:

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

It's interesting that Paul begins with a negative statement, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." He could have said, "I am proud of the the gospel." But by stating it negatively he is addressing any suspicion that he might be embarrassed or ashamed of preaching the gospel in a place like Rome which was comparatively sophisticated and cosmopolitan. Paul acknowledged in places such as 1 Corinthians 1:18 that his message seemed foolish to some people:

18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

In Paul's day as well as ours, many people think that what we believe is simply foolish (or arrogant or prejudiced or any number of other things). Many people consider it foolish to think that your eternal destiny hinges on what you believe about a man who lived in a remote country in the Middle East a long time ago. Paul readily acknowledged this perception (and we should too). But that didn't make him ashamed of the gospel - as if it were something he should hide or be embarrassed about.

Why? Because "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Through this message about Jesus God **powerfully brings salvation** to everyone who believes. Paul is saying here that the message of the gospel is inherently powerful. That power is experienced by those who respond in faith. It's important for those who share the gospel to be humble, articulate, and sincere. But the power of the gospel doesn't rest with the messenger; the message itself is powerful because it expresses the deep spiritual truth about how we can be right with God. Many of us here today would say that we have experienced the power of the gospel for salvation.

When Paul writes "to the Jew first and also to the Greek," he is making both an historical and a theological point. Historically, the gospel was taken first to Jewish people. Jesus took the gospel primarily to Jews (see Matthew 15:24). As well, whenever apostles took the gospel to a city that had a Jewish synagogue, their pattern was to go first to the synagogue (see Acts 13:5, 14, 46; 14:1; 17:1-4; etc.). Next they would turn to the Gentiles.

But theologically, the gospel was given to the Jews first. The entire old testament speaks of the Messiah and the New Covenant in Jewish terms. For example, in Jeremiah 31:31 we read:

31 "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,"

As God's chosen people, the new covenant was first given to the Jews. It was something of a theological controversy in the first century that relatively few Jews entered into the new covenant through faith in Jesus. That's why in Romans 9 through 11 Paul answers accusations such as, "Does this mean that the word of God has failed?" (9:6) and "Has God then rejected His people?" (11:1). We'll talk about this in coming weeks.

In verse 17 Paul further clarifies why the gospel is powerful enough to bring salvation to all who believe.

17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

Paul says that the gospel reveals or makes manifest “the righteousness of God.” The righteousness of God can have a couple of different meanings. It can refer to an *attribute of God*: God is righteous in everything He does; He is always just and “right” in every action. We definitely see God’s justice in the gospel. In chapter 4 Paul will argue that the death of Jesus proves that God is both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (see 4:21-26).

Even though we do see God’s righteousness/justice in the gospel, I think Paul was primarily referring to something else: *the righteous status that God gives to those who have faith*. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God by articulating that those who trust in Jesus are declared righteous (i.e., justified). When Paul says that “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith” he is saying that it’s “by faith from first to last” (NIV). We don’t attain this right standing with God through our works; we are given this status through our faith, trusting in Jesus. He supports this claim by quoting Habakkuk 2:4, “But the righteous man shall live by faith.”

With this understanding of what’s at stake, we can now see why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. Even though some people ridiculed and slandered him, Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because ***it revealed how sinful people (Jew or Greek) can have a right standing before God*** through faith in Jesus. Paul was more concerned about the salvation of others than about his own reputation or his own comfort or his own social standing. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. He understood that his spiritual influence among the Romans flowed from the truth of the gospel; it was that powerful.

You and I need to understand that our influence in the lives of others also flows from the gospel. Your influence in the lives of others isn’t ultimately dependent upon your flawless logic or mind-boggling intelligence or winsome personality. The gospel is the power of God for salvation.

Therefore, I would ask you, “Are you able to say along with Paul, ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel?’” Or would you honestly say, “Actually, I’m a bit embarrassed to say the name of Jesus out loud”? In Paul’s day as well as ours, there are subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle pressures to keep quiet and not speak about the gospel of Jesus Christ. I quizzed a few friends this week about ways in which they are tempted to be ashamed of the gospel. Here are some of their replies:

- “I want people to like me, and if I introduce the gospel into a relationship it might be offensive to them and cause them to not like me. And so it can be tempting to just play it safe and not raise the issue of the gospel at all. Of course, this is safe for me, but it is not really safe for them eternally.”
- “Sometimes I’m embarrassed by how ludicrous the message is....Jesus (the god-man) born of a virgin (you’ve got to be kidding!), died, three days later rose again (Seriously? You’re going there!)...and all I have to do is believe! Other times I’m embarrassed by the stumbling block side of Jesus. It’s awkward that he’s the only way. It makes me flinch sometimes.”
- “Sometimes I’m tempted to be ashamed of the Gospel because it seems like it’s a solution for a problem that people don’t think they have. It’s like it’s an answer to a

question that people haven't asked. I want to be a servant to people, and one of the first things a good servant does is to ask, "So what can I do to help?" "How can I best assist you?" Rarely do people say, "Tell me how my soul can be saved and my sins forgiven?" So the shame is in hearing people ask for one thing, and then giving them something else instead."

You can probably relate to something I just read. I can. But I pray that our study in the book of Romans will bring us each to the place where we can say with full conviction, "I am not ashamed of the gospel."

There's a tendency in our day - even among people who believe the gospel - to downplay the need to speak the gospel to others. You may have heard the quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." That quotation is problematic for at least a couple of reasons. For starters, scholars tell us that Francis (who was a preacher) never said, "Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary." He did urge his brothers to "preach the gospel with their deeds" (see Glenn T. Stanton, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>). But that's very different than saying that preaching the gospel rarely (if ever) requires words.

The second thing that's problematic about this quote is that it implies that you can share the gospel without mentioning the name of Jesus Christ and discussing the significance of His life, death, and resurrection. Over in Romans 10:14 Paul writes this (after saying that "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved"):

14 How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?

I'm making the simple point that the gospel is a message that has content. And people need to hear that content in order to believe. I would never discount the importance of a life well-lived; our lives should scream that we are people who know and love God. But people can respect and admire our lives and never understand that they too can experience the same kind of life through faith in Jesus. Paul would say that it's a both/and situation when it comes to the lives we live and the words we speak (see 1 Thessalonians 2:8).

As you think about the people you want to influence - whether believers or those who don't yet believe - think about the possibility that they might experience the power of the gospel. Your application this week might be to extend an invitation to someone to attend the Alpha course with you. Or perhaps your application is to simply initiate a conversation about Jesus with someone; maybe you can simply share your experience with Jesus with somebody else. Or maybe your application involves cultivating more compassion for the people in your life by being thankful for them, praying for them, and pondering how to influence them directly. In case it's not clear, let me say that compassion is what fuels our desire for spiritual influence. We don't seek to influence others in order to feel good or look good. We seek to influence others because our

compassion prompts us to want the best for others. The best for others involves a relationship with God through Jesus.