

Growing in Influence

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Preacher: Emily MacArthur

- [0 : 0 0] So we're continuing our series Growing In and as Richard said the topic today is Growing In Influence. So I've been thinking about the concept of Jesus and influence.
- Did Jesus want to be influential in perhaps the way that we would understand influence? Was it his main objective and is it something that he wants for us?
- And what came to mind is this bit of writing by the Canadian Baptist preacher James Alan Francis. And it's quite old. I'm sure many of you have heard it before.
- But I think it kind of introduces this topic really nicely. Jesus was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant. He grew up in another village where he worked in a carpentine shop until he was 30.
- Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held office. He never had a family or owned a home.
- [1 : 0 8] He didn't go to college. He never lived in a big city. And he never travelled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness.
- He had no credentials but himself. Nineteen centuries have come and gone. And today he is the central figure of the human race.
- I am well within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all the kings that have ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of people on earth as much as that one solitary life.
- So yes, Jesus was influential, as we will see right from the start of his ministry and actually looking back a bit to his boyhood. But in Jesus' upside-down kingdom, where the power structures are not the same as the power structures of earthly things, influence isn't gained in the normal way of achieving greatness.
- And I'm going to look at three themes. If I can have that slide. Thank you. Yes, the first one is going to be listening and learning.
- [2 : 2 9] So how can we learn from Jesus? How can we listen in a way that is humble?
- I'm going to look at the authority and anointing of Jesus. And also I'm going to look at calling and commissioning, how Jesus uses us in his mission. So firstly, listening and learning.
- So in our reading, it's before Jesus' ministry has actually begun and it's every parent's nightmare. Jesus gets lost and he's found three days later.
- I think we almost see like a little bit of that upside-down kingdom at work. The perspective of the parents is they think that Jesus is lost. But Jesus isn't lost. He's where he's supposed to be in his father's house.
- So it's that differing perspective at work. And we hear from the reading that he has been in the temple and he's listening to the teachers of the law and he is asking them questions.

- [3 : 32] I've wondered what Jesus has to learn from the religious teachers. Because in his ministry, he often corrects them, doesn't he? And sometimes even rebukes them.
- So I'm struck by Jesus' humility here. He is listening and learning from the temple teachers. And he is also asking them questions.
- Sorry, I'll do it without the slides. Is there a bit? Oh, brilliant. He's asking questions. And I think this is really interesting because for me, Jesus' use of questions is one of the hallmarks of his ministry.
- He asks some amazing questions throughout the Gospels. If you just have time this week, just look through one of them and all the questions that he asks. What do you want me to do for you?
- He asked James and John. Why are you crying? He asked Mary. Is anyone left here to condemn you? To the woman caught in adultery.
- [4 : 35] Which is easier to say your sins are forgiven or to rise and walk to the Pharisees? And who do you say that I am to Peter?
- Jesus doesn't ask questions because he needs to know the answers. I think he asks questions because he wants to create dialogue. He wants to engage with people.
- He wants to help people learn by encouraging them to participate in the conversation. He wants to help them think deeply and philosophically.
- He wants to draw them to think about contemporary references. Sometimes I think when we want to be influential, when people want to create power for themselves, they often take control of the conversation.
- And sometimes this means that they silence the voices of others. And it's quite a fear-based strategy. And because Jesus doesn't have any fear, it's not a strategy that he uses.
- [5 : 36] He is secure enough in who he is to encourage dialogue with other people. He gives people space, opportunities to talk about their hopes and fears.
- And sometimes he even diffuses a very heightened, angry situation with a question. And I think in Western civilization, we have perhaps lost this skill, the ability to hold authority without taking power away from other people.
- If you look at an online article, blog, social media post, you will see underneath it, there is the very innocently named comments box.
- The world encourages us to give opinions, to counter the views of others sometimes. And internet algorithms, which are designed to amplify engagement, can end up amplifying discord, not to the points of agreement.
- So maybe this is a challenge for us. Next time you hear an opinion you don't agree with, can you first ask a question? Can you seek to understand better?
- [6 : 54] Questioning builds empathy. It allows us to climb inside the skin of the other person and understand their perspective more fully. If I could have the next slide.
- And it makes me think of one of my favorite quotes from Thomas Aquinas, the theologian. We must love them both, those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject.
- For both have labored in search for truth and both have helped us in finding it. Don't build unity by ignoring the difficult opinions of others.
- We build unity by understanding each other better and by allowing the Holy Spirit to soften our hearts to those around us. So the next theme on the next slide is authority and anointing.

So I struggled with the word influence because it's not really a biblical word. Actually, it's not found at all in the New Testament. It's found once in the New King James Version of the Bible.

[8 : 01] It's once in the book of Job. But the word we often have is used extensively in the New Testament and we had in our reading is the word favour. Jesus is in favour with God and man.

And the Greek word is the same that Richard referenced last week. It's the word charis and it means grace.

And actually used in this context, it means filled with the spirit of grace and favour. And it's the root of our word charismatic and also the word charisma.

So charisma originally meant having a God-given grace, something that was unearned. And when we see it in the New Testament in reference to Jesus, but also to other biblical figures.

So in Acts 7, when Stephen speaks to the Sanhedrin, he uses this word charis to describe Joseph in the Old Testament, Joseph and King David.

[9 : 08] And the angel Gabriel uses the same word to describe Mary. She has found charis favourite with God. So charis is the presence of the spirit of God.

So that growing in influence is about growing in God's spirit and allowing it to transform you. So Jesus has this charisma, even as a boy sitting in the temple courts.

We hear that people are amazed to witness it. And we see this spirit of God present with Jesus throughout his ministry.

If I could have the next slide, please. So in Luke 4, verse 14, we hear Jesus return to Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit. The news about him spread through the whole countryside.

Later in that chapter, after casting out an evil spirit, all the people were amazed and said to one another, what words are these? With authority and power, he gives authority.

[10 : 11] He gives orders to impure spirits and they come out of him. And the news about him spread to the surrounding area. The spreading influence of Jesus is due to the presence of the Holy Spirit, the anointing and authority of his preaching.

So in Luke 5, in the next chapter, Jesus heals a man of leprosy. And he orders him not to tell anyone. But yet the news about him spread all the more so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their illnesses.

So I've been wondering, why does Jesus not want the man healed of leprosy to tell anyone? I think it's a bit of a puzzle considering how much Jesus' influence is already spreading.

Well, Jesus has the anointing and authority that comes from the Holy Spirit. And I think he knows that he doesn't need anything else to control or influence the message in any earthly way.

He doesn't need a campaign manager or a spin doctor. If you've been watching the election campaign this week, you might have thought that some of our politicians really do need those things. But Jesus doesn't.

[11 : 28] He's confident enough in the power of God and the strength of the Holy Spirit. It's maybe 20 years ago. So it was just after the Toronto blessing and the fresh outpouring of the Spirit in the UK.

My mum was running a daytime alpha course in a kind of partly fairly deprived estate on the outskirts of York. And I hope she doesn't mind me saying this, because I'm sure she'll listen to this sermon.

But she didn't have a marketing campaign. Actually, she didn't really have a big plan for it at all. It started in quite a small way. But God was at work in that place and at that time.

And over the next few years, it really grew. And she ended up running many alpha courses. And lots of people came to Christ. And she told me the moment she knew it had really taken off was when a woman came to the daytime alpha course.

Because that morning, she was hanging up the washing in her garden. And her neighbour stuck her head over the garden fence and said, I need to tell you about Jesus. When the Holy Spirit works in this way, I don't really need to do anything, do we?

[12 : 47] And sometimes we need to make sure that we actually don't get in the way of it. I'm going to give you an example of what I mean by that. At my previous church, I was leading a group on the alpha course.

And the course had gone really well. And afterwards, the church asked me and my friend to form a home group for the people who have recently come to faith. I'd been given a discipleship course from my church.

And the first few weeks I ran this course, I hadn't got past the first question on the discipleship course. I felt frustrated. I wasn't going to plan.

I was working hard. But as someone who had grown up in the church, I just felt there was a chasm between my understanding and the understanding of these new Christians in my group.

I felt I wasn't explaining theological concepts in a way they understood. And I felt like I was failing at discipling them. I persevered.

[13 : 48] And God taught me a great deal during those years. He taught me to love people wholeheartedly. He taught me to accept them for who they are and where they were in their faith.

And most importantly, I think he taught me to be patient as the Holy Spirit does its transforming work. Jesus trusts God's authority and the power of the Spirit to do its work.

And so should we. Next slide is calling and commissioning. So when you launch a marketing campaign, I used to work in marketing a long time ago now, you look for influential people to back it.

We call those influencers. Might have heard of that term. And influencers are people with a big platform of followers, people whose words are most likely to get repeated.

So maybe we would expect Jesus filled with the charisma, the Spirit of God, to look for other charismatic people as his early disciples.

[14 : 55] But as we know, that is not what Jesus does. He chooses nobodies. He looks as monk, tax collectors and fishermen.

And if we look at this passage, Luke chapter 5, calling of the first disciples. So it's Luke 5 verses 4 to 10. Simon answered, Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't called anything.

But because you say so, I will let down the nets. When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them.

And they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus's knees and said, Go away from me, Lord.

I am a sinful man. For he and all his disciples were astonished at the catch they had taken. And so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

[15 : 59] Then Jesus said to Simon, Don't be afraid. From now on, you will fish for people. I like to think that it is the moment that Jesus kneels in the sand and declares himself a sinner, that Jesus knows he has his man, the rock whom he will build his church upon.

To be filled with the charis, the spirit and the favour of God, we first need to empty our hearts of the stuff we have allowed to fill its place.

The self-importance that is already there. And I think Peter does this in his encounter with Jesus. Jesus looks for people who know they have nothing because he knows that the Holy Spirit will fill them.

Influential people in the gospel struggle to accept Jesus because they don't think they need him. Or like the rich man, they are unwilling to let go of what already fills their hearts.

Which one will we be? And the next slide. Jesus commissions those whom he calls. We see this with Peter and the disciples.

[17 : 14] We see it with a Samaritan woman at the well telling the good news to her village. And in Mary Magdalene, who in John 20 encounters the resurrected Jesus in the garden and is sent to tell the disciples.

Jesus wants to fill us so he can commission us for kingdom work. And where Mary reaches the disciples, Luke tells us that they don't believe her.

And in the end, Jesus has to go in person so that Thomas can touch the scars in his hand. So why does Jesus send Mary? Well, I wonder what it meant to Mary to be the one to carry that news.

By the reign of Constantine the Great, 300 years later, there are 33 million Christians who believe in the resurrection of Christ. But when Mary leaves the garden on Easter morning, she is the only one who knows.

Imagine what it would have been looked like, what it would have felt like to be the bearer of that news. Jesus collaborates with us for the gospel because he loves us.

[18 : 27] He wants us to be part of it. So Jesus doesn't choose the obvious people. He looks for emptiness and he fills us up with the power of the Spirit.

I'm going to show you a picture of, do you recognize my two girls over on the left with some of their friends on the right? Does anyone know where this picture was taken? Anyone recognize it?

It's not a great picture. It's taken at the Barbican, near the Barbican Centre, right outside the Museum of London, where it used to be.

And it's outside a memorial, which is called, I don't know if anyone's ever been to see it, it's called the Oldersgate Flame. And I know about it because the Museum of London was the first place I worked in London.

I used to pass it every day on my way in. And it was on this spot, on the 24th of May, 1738, that John Wesley attended a prayer meeting and he felt his heart strangely warmed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[19 : 38] And on the 24th of May this year, Pete Gregg, who's director of 24-7 Prayer, shared this online about John Wesley's great revival.

Wesley's great awakening was not primarily a political movement, though it shaped the political landscape profoundly. Neither was it primarily a justice movement, though it led to free education, the first lending banks for the poor and the abolition of slavery in the British Empire.

Neither was it primarily a movement of cultural and artistic renaissance, though it certainly inspired new music, new architecture, new ideas.

This movement in its genesis was not political, cultural or societal, but spiritual. It grew to span the earth, but began with the shortest journey of them all, 18 inches from one brilliant brain to one hungry heart, a touch from the Holy Spirit that took place quietly on this day in 1738.

When we think of growing in influence, I think we think of growth as something we can see externally. So if you look at my girls downstairs today, you will see visual evidence of how they have grown since this photo was taken.

[21 : 09] But growth begins internally, the secretion of growth hormones, the firing of neural pathways in our brains, the metabolism of food for energy, God's great life-giving spirit at work within us.

The first steps are invisible to us, but vital to the growth process. So how will we grow to be influential for Jesus?

By listening and learning, studying our Bibles, asking questions, seeking to understand those we disagree with, so that through unity, we can increase in influence.

Authority and anointing allow the authority of God and the anointing of his spirit to do its work. Allow its space to breathe.

Don't seek to control it. Seek to release it. Calling and commissioning. God will call the people that we least expect. Can we elevate those who God has anointed, but are humble enough to do things God's way and not their own way?

[22 : 21] You know, I'm desperate to see the growing influence of Jesus, really desperate to see it. And I look for it. I look for it in political campaigns, in scientific discoveries, in intellectual and cultural debate, and even for news of packed churches and prayer meetings.

But I need to remember that growth starts within. Can I empty my heart of my own desire for power and influence so the Holy Spirit can take control?

Can I allow the Holy Spirit to transform my heart so that it will grow to change my world? So Lord, send revival.

May it start with me. Amen. Amen.