



INFLUENCING FOR CHRIST

Believers represent God by using their influence to bring others to Him.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-27; 10:31-33; 11:1

Each day we encounter people who try to influence us. Some do so on purpose while others do it simply by being who they are. Every person we encounter may be influenced by us as well. We never know the impact of our life's influence on someone else, nor what that influence will yield beyond our reach.

What living person has had the most positive influence in your life? Has anyone had a negative influence? Who have you had the most influence on, for better or worse?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1–11:1

Our Scripture passage this week brings into clearer focus the stewardship of influence. How we live before others really does matter. Paul's concern for the Corinthians was that they underestimated their influence in bringing others to Christ. Rather than living in self-focused ways, Paul challenged his readers (and us) to run the race in the right way, with the right goals in mind. Let's consider how to adorn—and not hinder—the gospel of Christ with our lives.

Paul's letter to the Corinthian believers addressed a few matters they asked about in a letter to him (1 Cor. 7:1). He already tackled divisions in the church (chaps. 1–4), issues regarding sexual immorality (chaps. 5–6), and marriage and singleness (chap. 7). In chapters 8–10, Paul focused his attention on another question posed to him by the Corinthian church: Was it appropriate for believers to eat food sacrificed to idols?

The issue was deeper than just eating food. It was an issue of understanding the nature of Christian liberty and the priority of love over selfish gain. The brothers or sisters for whom Christ died are much more important than the freedom to eat food sacrificed to idols (8:11).

The stewardship of influence was important to Paul. One's influence on a brother or sister in Christ to either help them or harm them is worthy of deep consideration and application. One's influence on unbelievers for the sake of the gospel must not be underestimated either. In chapter 9, Paul specifically expanded on this idea. Finally, Paul used ancient Israel as a negative example for what falling into idolatry can produce (10:1-12). Today's lesson will consider how believers represent the Lord by using their influence to bring others to him.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-27; and 10:31–11:1 in your Bible. Look for actions Paul was calling on the Corinthians to imitate. How might these actions point others to Christ?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WALKING IN THEIR SHOES (1 COR. 9:19-23)

¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

VERSE 19

Some believers in Corinth were using their freedom in Christ as an opportunity to please themselves rather than to serve others in love. Using himself as an example, Paul said, ***though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all.*** He could have demanded his rights as an apostle and expected the Corinthians to serve him, but he didn't (see vv. 3-15). Why not? Because his reward was in preaching the gospel, offering it free of charge, not as a good exchanged for compensation (vv. 17-18). Paul's approach was explicitly Christlike (see Mark 10:45; Phil. 2:5-8). For Paul, demanding his rights was counter-gospel and would actually hinder the gospel of Christ (v. 12). So he laid down his rights and took up the mantle of Christ as a servant.

The reason Paul made himself the slave of all was ***that I might win more of them.*** The original language simply says "in order to gain more." He didn't mean personal gain for his benefit; he meant gaining people. The verses to follow make this point clear. Paul's gain was more people being saved.

What might making yourself a servant to all in order to win more people look like in today's culture? What roadblocks get in the way of people being more intentional in reaching others?



KEY DOCTRINE: *Evangelism and Missions*

It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.

VERSES 20-23

Several groups are identified as part of Paul's missionary strategy. He intentionally approached **Jews** first. The gospel, after all, is the power of God for salvation "first to the Jew" (Rom. 1:16). It is surprising that Paul said ***I became as a Jew***. Paul was a Jew and his résumé always included this important aspect (2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:4-6). His goal was to win Jews for the sake of the gospel, although he himself no longer viewed his ethnicity as advantageous with respect to God (Phil. 3:7-9). Even so, he could relate to the Jews and connect them to the gospel.

It is unclear whether or not ***those under the law*** were distinct from the Jews just mentioned. Paul's conversion to Christ meant breaking from his religious past, especially from trying to keep the law as a means of salvation. Yet, he ***became as one under the law*** in order to ***win those under the law***. Paul accommodated to Jewish practices—including circumcision at times (Acts 16:1-3)—as a means to open doors for evangelism among Jews. Paul was not under the law, nor are any who belong to Christ. They are now under grace (Rom. 6:14-15).

To those outside the law, Paul ***became as one outside the law***. He was not advocating lawless living. He clarified that he was under ***the law of Christ***. His point was that he related to Gentiles to win those without the law. After all, Paul's calling from Christ was to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). He "had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised" (Gal. 2:7), and his goal was to win as many as possible for Christ.

Lastly, Paul sought to ***win the weak***. The overall context of 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 suggests that *the weak* were believers in danger of having their consciences defiled by those exercising their freedom in Christ to eat meat sacrificed to idols. His description of groups in 1 Corinthians 10:32 is a strong support for this view.

The gospel determines our conduct toward believers and unbelievers alike. Paul's conclusion was: ***I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.***

Paul was thinking strategically about the mission—more believers, more partnerships in the gospel, more support, and thus, the gospel to more people. He desired to ***share with them in the blessings*** that flow from people trusting Christ and obeying the gospel, which is why he himself was a slave to all.

How can a believer contextualize the gospel without compromising the gospel? What principles can be found in this passage for establishing a proper line?

Athletic Metaphors in the New Testament

<i>Run with purpose, run to win the prize.</i>	<i>1 Corinthians 9:24; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 2:16</i>
<i>Winning requires discipline, self-control.</i>	<i>1 Corinthians 9:25-27</i>
<i>Compete according to God's rules.</i>	<i>2 Timothy 2:5</i>
<i>Run with perseverance.</i>	<i>Hebrews 12:1; Galatians 5:7; 2 Timothy 4:7</i>

RUNNING IN THE RACE (1 COR. 9:24-27)

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

VERSES 24-25

Running and racing were among Paul's favorite metaphors. He used athletic metaphors in most of his letters (1 Cor. 15:32; Phil. 2:16; 3:13-14; 1 Thess. 2:2; 1 Tim. 1:18; 4:7; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:7). His use of



runners was savvy, indeed, since Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, similar to the famous Olympic games in Greece.

Paul's main point was this: **So run that you may obtain** the prize. Although in other contexts Paul focused on the prize itself (see Phil. 3:12-14), here his emphasis was on how to run the race. Of course, one doesn't just show up to an Olympic event and expect to compete and win without significant training and personal sacrifice. No, **every athlete exercises self-control in all things**. It takes effort and discipline. Paul is making an important point: Live a self-controlled Christian life, at maximum effort, in order to be an influential witness for Christ among all people.

We do this because of the gospel. Runners in the games seek **a perishable wreath**. The prize for their achievement in the Isthmian Games was a pine wreath. Imagine, all that training and effort for a crown of twigs and leaves! No doubt fame, acclaim, and hero status were added to their victory. But we run our race for Christ, to win **an imperishable** crown. There is much more to gain, so run to receive "the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to [us] on that day" we finish our race (2 Tim. 4:8).

BIBLE SKILL: Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a major doctrine.

The term translated "crown" (*stephanos*) in the original language of 9:25, referred to a victor's crown rather than a king's crown (*diadema*). Review 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; and Revelation 2:10 for other passages in which believers' rewards are described as a *stephanos*. How can you relate these passages to this week's lesson?

VERSES 26-27

Paul underscored his argument by insisting that self-control and discipline are what make the difference. When we run, it's not **aimlessly** like someone who has no understanding of what it takes

to reach the finish line. Likewise, we don't **box as one beating the air**; rather, we have a target and an objective. We know the prize that lies before us, but it will take directed effort and self-control to reach it.

Paul himself wanted to share in the blessings of the gospel and its influence on those who were lost. That's why, as his entire argument has made clear, he was willing to **discipline** his own body and **keep it under control**. It takes discipline and self-control to limit one's freedoms for the sake of others.

After preaching to others, Paul did not want to be **disqualified**. He didn't mean that he'd be kicked out of the race, as if to mean he'd lose his salvation. Rather, he meant exactly what he had been saying all along: he wanted to run in such a way to win others, to win the race, to win the prize—and that's why he kept himself under control, so he didn't lose out on the blessings of those things.

How does living a disciplined lifestyle reflect God's character? What methods might a person use to stay focused on pleasing God?

FOLLOWING OUR LEADER (1 COR. 10:31-33; 11:1)

^{10:31} So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. ^{11:1} Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

After demonstrating Israel's failure to control their desires and idolatrous ways (10:1-22), Paul concluded his extended argument on Christian liberty. What he began in 6:12 he completed in 10:23. His summary conclusion? No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person (10:24). In these remaining verses, Paul issued three commands.

VERSE 31

Paul's first command was to **do all to the glory of God**. Our actions and desires should not be to please ourselves; instead, everything we do is ultimately for the purpose of bringing glory to God. After all, we were created for God's glory (Isa. 43:7). Paul's command is both



specific and exhaustive. He said **whether you eat or drink**, referring to his overall discussion about food sacrificed to idols, eat and drink for God's glory. But he also said that **whatever you do**, do it for God's glory. We cannot limit this discussion to food and drink because all of life is meant to bring God glory. Live by this gospel-centered, God-honoring, decision-making ethic: *do all to the glory of God*.

What are some practical ways of living out this passage? How can a person honor God in all things with humility?

VERSES 32-33

Paul's second command was to **give no offense**. Once again, he summarized his larger argument about preferring others before ourselves. Do we have freedom? Absolutely. Paul said, "why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?" (10:29) Even so, he concluded, **I try to please everyone in everything I do**. If my freedom causes offense to someone else, then I shouldn't exercise that freedom. Following Paul's example, we should not seek our own benefit, **but that of many**. People's eternal destinies are more valuable than any personal pleasure we receive from exercising our freedoms. That was Paul's goal, **that they may be saved**. Our goal should be the same.

CHAPTER 11; VERSE 1

Paul's last command was to **be imitators of me**. He was exhorting his readers and us to follow him and his example of glorifying God. Paul was not thinking of himself more highly than he ought. Rather, his command to imitate him pointed to a greater reality: **as I am of Christ**. Paul's example is faithful and worthy of imitation since he himself was imitating Christ.

What would be the ramifications of placing yourself in a position to be an example for all to see? Why might people shy away from being looked at as an example to follow?

IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers are to do all they can to seek to win others to Christ without compromising the gospel.
- Believers are to live their lives with discipline, striving to receive commendation from the Father.
- Believers are to live as Christian examples of what it means to follow Christ.

As a group, discuss areas of Christian liberty that might influence fellow believers and also unbelievers. What principles from this passage does your group need to incorporate and how?

Where has God given you influence over others? How can you make a greater investment in that stewardship of influence?

List a few people who have had an influence on your spiritual life. What qualities influenced you the most? What specific ways did their actions affect you? What do you need to do to have a greater influence on others for the sake of the gospel?

Prayer Needs

