

Pearls from Proverbs

Sharpened with Iron

Sam Jones

Solomon, the wise man, states a fact in Proverbs 27:17, "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend." [All Scripture references are taken from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.] It takes steel to sharpen steel. A knife or blade cannot be sharpened by wood or plastic, because they are not hard enough. To sharpen a blade requires iron or something at least as hard as iron. Once a dull and rusty blade is sharpened, it is better in at least two ways: first, it looks better, and secondly, it will most likely be more productive in cutting.

So as iron is sharpened by iron, a person's "countenance" or character is sharpened or dulled by the friends or associates with which he/she interacts. The wise man is implying in this proverb that a person's behavior, attitude, perceptions and thoughts are all influenced by others. Therefore, Christians must be extremely cautious in the selection of friends or people with whom they choose to interact (1 Cor. 15:33). Christians must strive to select friends who will sharpen their character or reputation and who will make them look better spiritually (Prov. 27:9). Christians will have friends, and so we cannot avoid interacting with others (in the church and in the world), but we can be more selective and cautious with those with whom we have a long term interaction. People influence people! The goal of this presentation will be to examine from a Biblical perspective

how we influence others and how others also influence us. To achieve this goal, this presentation has three objectives: first, to explain the power of influence; second, to describe how Christians can be a positive influence on others; and finally, to encourage an awareness of how Christians can be influenced by others.

INFLUENCE IS POWERFUL!

A central idea in the discipline of sociology from which many assumptions are deducted is that we are social human beings. Our lives are affected by one another, especially the various social groups to which we belong. Again, in Proverbs 27:17, the wise man implies we are social beings. We need and want the companionship of others (Gen. 2:18). In this interaction, we influence others and others influence us.

Understanding the powerful impact others can have on us and vice versa, the wise man also wrote, “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools should be destroyed” (Prov. 13:20). His point is that we are molded by the company we keep. It’s not up to us to determine whether or not we will be influenced, but only how we will be influenced. If we walk with the wise—under their instructions, encouragement and example—there is the strong probability we will be wise. On the other hand, if we select to interact or associate with “bad” influences or characters, then there is an equal chance we will be “bad” people. Our principles, values, beliefs and habits will be established and decisions will be made predicated on the influences in our lives.

The power of influence is seen in Paul’s exhortation to young Timothy. He said, “Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers...Take heed

unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:12, 16). The power of influence teaches that Christians—who are able to put into practice or display in their lives sound speech, a good manner of life, a love for others, a good attitude, faithful living and a restraint from impurities—will achieve two objectives: first, they will put themselves in the condition to be saved; and secondly, they can influence others to desire to know Jesus which can lead to their obedience to the gospel.

Influence is powerful! The million-dollar question is, are we an influence for good or bad? We are always influencing others and/or being influenced by others.

CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE AN INFLUENCE FOR GOOD

In Acts 4, Peter and John had been imprisoned and were standing before the Sanhedrin for preaching the gospel of Christ. The Sadducees were upset with them for they preached "...Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (v. 2). According to verse 13, several things were observed by the Sanhedrin related to Peter and John: first, they were men of courage; second, they were uneducated men; and third, they had been influenced by Jesus.

There was something about these two men that identified that they had been in contact with Jesus. Was it their clothes? Was it their speech? Was it their diet? There was something about them that caused them to say, "...they had been with Jesus." What is it about us that causes people to say that we have been with Jesus? There should be certain things which are observable for people to conclude Jesus has touched or molded our lives.

In several places in the Bible, Christians are encouraged to live so as to be a good influence on others.

These exhortations are stated in the form of metaphors. Let us examine three of the metaphors.

You are the Salt of the Earth

In Matthew 5:13, Jesus proclaims to His disciples, “You are the salt of the earth.” Salt during the time of Christ was both a valuable and essential mineral. Even today, salt has many useful functions. Salt, after it comes into contact with a substance, will affect it. Christians have been given the challenge to be positive influencers in the world. Christians, like salt, are to be a preservative. Salt gives meat a longer length of life or usefulness. By teaching the glorious gospel of Christ to those who are lost, we are functioning as a preservative (Matt. 28:19-20; Rom. 1:16). During the winter when snow and ice accumulate on the highway, salt is used to thaw the ice. By sharing the wonderful good news of the gospel, especially what God the Father and His Son have done for the world, it should soften the hardened hearts of people (John 12:32). Salt is also used as a seasoning ingredient. It improves the taste or favor of food after it has been applied. Christians should improve the values and beliefs of society by influencing for good those with whom they interact. Christians ought to make a difference—they are the “salt of the earth.”

You are the Light of the World

Jesus told His disciples that not only are you the “salt of the earth,” but you are the “light of the world” (Matt. 5:14-16). In several passages, the world is described as being in darkness (Col. 1:13; 1 John 5:19). Paul reminds the Christians at Ephesus that they once were in darkness, but now they are to be lights in the world—thus, live as children of light (Eph. 5:8). Light serves the function of removing darkness. The challenge for Christians is not

only to strive to eradicate darkness or sin, but to illuminate as light in this world of darkness to guide or influence people to Jesus. If Christians don't let their lights shine to reveal the message of hope, the message of truth, then who will?

Light is designed to give hope. Years ago, before ships had advanced navigation systems, during storms and at night, the captain of a ship would look for a light house for safety. Christians are expected to be a light house. They are to be a source of comfort for those who are troubled; they are to provide a message of hope for those who are lost and are trying to find their way to God.

If Christians refuse to shine as lights, then they can hinder people from coming to Jesus. Paul pleads with Christians to "shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15). Are you shining as a light or has your light gone out?

You are a Living Epistle

Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:2 portrays the Christian life as an epistle. He told the Corinthians, you are an "epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men." An epistle is a letter or book. What do people do with a letter or book? A letter or book is read! People observe us and read us daily. As a result of this, Christians need to be careful in both what they say and what they do.

An epistle conveys the intent of its author. If Jesus is the author of your life, then He ought to be seen in you. How can a person claim that Jesus is the author of his/her life, if Jesus is not seen in any chapter of the person's life? To be a living epistle for Christ requires that He be seen and observed in each chapter of your life.

In order for us to be living epistles for Christ, we must do several things: first, each day we must work at having the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5); second, it demands

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that Jesus live in us (Gal. 2:20); third, our lives have been changed or have been transformed into the image of Christ; and finally, Jesus is graciously magnified in our behavior (Phil. 2:20). Are you a living epistle for Jesus? As a teenager, the following poem was quoted to me, conveying the type of Christian I was expected to be. The poem is entitled “The Gospel According to You”:

You are writing a Gospel,
A chapter each day,
By the deeds that you do,
By the words that you say.
Men read what you write
Whether faithless or true,
Say! What is the gospel
According to you?

CHRISTIANS CANNOT NOT BE INFLUENCED

Christians are expected to be a positive influence on others. As we are attempting to influence others for good, we need to be mindful or aware that others can influence us. This thought brings to mind Paul’s warning to the Corinthians. He said to them, “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33). Just as we can influence people, they can influence us. In other words, as we interact with others, we cannot not be influenced – for good or bad.

Let us now examine several examples where others were influenced for good and some were influenced for bad.

Solomon

For most of Solomon's life, the Bible described how he permitted God to shape his life. But later in life, he ceased to give heed to God's warnings of the "bad" influences others can be. The Bible says that Solomon "loved many strange women...Of the nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go into them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods..." (1 Kgs. 11:1-2). In the process of time, "...when Solomon was old...his wives turned away his heart after other gods..." (1 Kgs. 11:4). Be very careful of the people with whom you choose to associate, because they can entice you to do wrong or turn from God.

Naomi

One of the great love stories of the Bible is the loving relationship between Naomi and Ruth. Naomi, her husband and sons were God-believing and God-fearing individuals. Because of a famine in their land, they moved to the country of Moab. One of Naomi's sons married Ruth. Ruth and Naomi became the best of friends. Naomi influenced Ruth in many ways. One powerful way in which she influenced Ruth was by sharing her faith in God.

After the death of Naomi's son and Ruth's husband, Naomi encouraged Ruth to return to her family and relatives in Moab. Naomi persistently encouraged Ruth to return to her family, and Ruth said, "Intreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go: and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God..." (Ruth 1:16). Naomi was a good influence on Ruth. What kind of influence are you?

Mordecai

Esther was adopted by Mordecai (Est. 2:7). Esther, who was a Jew, over time obtained approval of the king who was not a Jew (Est. 2:15-17). Haman developed an extremely strong dislike for Mordecai and the Jews. Eventually Haman encouraged King Ahasuerus to post in every province the following statement related to Jews, "...to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey" (Est. 3:13).

Being fully aware of the situation facing the Jews and aware that Esther had gained the favor of the King, Mordecai encouraged her to go to the king and explain the evil plot of Haman. Esther was unwilling to go before the king. The king had a decree that if any person came to him who had not been summoned—the person would be put to death. She had not been invited to present herself before the king in some thirty days. She knew the law and sent word to Mordecai that she was unwilling to put her life on the line.

Because of the relationship between Mordecai and Esther, he was able to influence her to do the right thing despite the fact that she could lose her life (Est. 4:11-14). Mordecai had a positive influence on Esther. She had the following words sent to Mordecai, "Go gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in into the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish" (Est. 4:16). She was influenced by Mordecai to do the right thing. Again, what kind of influence are you?

Are you shaping people's lives for the better or for the worst?

The Ten Spies

In Joshua 14:8, Caleb reflects with members of the various tribes present of the event prior to marching into the Promised Land, and how his brethren that went "up with [them] made the heart of the people melt..." Moses provides a detailed description of the situation beginning in Numbers 13:26. Moses gave instructions to the twelve spies to spy out the condition of the land. The spies returned and started giving their report. They all agreed that the people who dwelled in the Promised Land were strong, the cities were walled and the land flowed with milk and honey.

Joshua and Caleb believed that they could go up at once and possess the land. But the other ten men disagreed. They gave their perspective of the situation, "...We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we." Furthermore, they told the people that the people who lived in the land were like giants and the Israelites were like grasshoppers (Num. 13:31-34).

These ten spies were able to influence the behavior and decision of the Israelites. The power of influence is seen in the fact that these ten men caused the people's hearts to melt. As a result of their influence, the people began to murmur against Moses and Aaron. "...And they said one to another, let us make a captain, and let us return to Egypt" (Num. 14:1-4). As Christians, we can influence people for good, and the reality is that Christians can be influenced for bad. Again, what kind of people are influencing you?

CONCLUSION

In a speech at the Annual FHU Lectureship a few years ago, David Lane said, "There is nothing wrong with a boat being in water, but there is something wrong when water gets into the boat." He went on to say, "There is nothing wrong with a Christian being in the world, but there is something wrong when the world gets into a Christian." Christians are required to influence the world and do all we can to not permit it to influence us (Rom. 12:2).

The wise man compares life to a knife or blade. We are told that without the proper sharpening, we will surely become dull and seemingly useless. Thus, the wise man in this metaphor says, "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend" (Prov. 27:17). We must remain "sharp" for God's use and approval. Furthermore, we are expected to remain sharp so that we can be a powerful influence for good on those with whom we come into contact. Peter and John's behavior had been sharpened by Jesus. The Sadducees observed that Jesus had influenced them (Acts 4:13). Can people tell that Jesus has sharpened or molded your life?

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