

PART 4

I WILL BE AN INFLUENCER

Being faithful means using your influence to help others experience God's grace and the love of Jesus. By recognizing the impact you have on those around you, you pre-decide to pray, lead by example, and speak truth in love. By shaping your decisions on the opportunities for influence you have, you become salt and light in the world, adding flavor and bringing light. Deciding to make the most of your influence requires risk as you look for opportunities around you and act on them for God's kingdom. Here are the key principles you will learn in part 4:

- Jesus said, "Go into the world and shine," not "go into your homes and hide."
- To be salt and light, you can pre-decide to influence with your prayers, your example, and your words.
- Prayer focuses your attention on opportunities you have to help others experience the grace of God and the love of Jesus.
- If you want to effect change in people's lives by *pointing* them to Jesus, start by *praying* for them.
- When you know who you are, you know what to do and how to influence by example.
- When you live out being salt and light, people notice and are changed.
- You are an influencer, and God wants to use you.
- Knowing how patient and persistent God has been with you, show others that same patience and persistence.

LESSON 8

I WILL INFLUENCE WITH MY PRAYERS

Salt and light find their purpose when they come in direct contact with food and darkness.²³

CRAIG GROESCHEL

Social media influencers continue to impact retail sales for virtually any and every product. Some influencers simply promote the products of their advertisers or sponsors. Others pride themselves on being independent and only recommend the items that they themselves have tested and use regularly. Still others bring followers along as they try out certain products within a particular niche.

Such is the case with travel blogger Cory Lee, who focuses specifically on travel for people with limitations and disabilities. Diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy at age two, Cory grew up using a wheelchair but never allowed it to stop him from enjoying his love of travel. As more people began asking for Cory's travel advice and recommendations, he started his blog, *Curb Free with Cory Lee*. He explains his mission is "to show you how to travel, where to travel, and most importantly, *why* travel as a person with a disability."²⁴

In 2021, Winnebago, an iconic brand in recreational vehicles, provided Cory with a new Winnebago Specialty Vehicle designed for travelers requiring wheelchairs or who have other special needs. In exchange for blogging and posting about his experiences, Cory was sponsored by Winnebago to travel across the country. The highly successful partnership reached more than 16,000 followers and included over 47,000 unique impressions. Winnebago picked up three times as many followers to their social media accounts as compared to a similar sponsored trip the prior year.²⁵

You don't have to be on social media, though, to wield significant influence.

Pre-deciding to be an influencer allows you to leverage something considerably more impactful than social media—the power of prayer.

- How many social media influencers do you regularly follow? How often do you make a purchase because of an online recommendation from an influencer?

- What qualities or characteristics make you more likely to trust the recommendations of an online influencer? Why?

- How often do you post reviews and recommendations online? Do you consider yourself a social media influencer?

- Who are the people who wield the most influence in your life right now? Why do you trust them to allow their influence to affect you?

EXPLORING GOD'S WORD

Jesus made it clear that we have something the world needs. He compared what we bring to salt—used for centuries as both a flavoring and a preservative—and to light—used since God created the heavens and the earth to illuminate darkness. Salt fulfills its purpose when it comes in direct contact with food. Light naturally illuminates any darkness surrounding it.

As followers of Jesus intent on making the best decisions, we recognize our influence. And we pre-decide to use our influence to glorify God, to point others to Jesus, and to advance God's kingdom. In his teaching known as the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus urged his followers to realize that what they bring to the world does no good until it's in the midst of those who need it most.

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

MATTHEW 5:13-16

- What do salt and light have in common with those of us who follow Jesus? What do we add when we choose to use our influence for God's purposes?
- What happens to followers who don't use what they have to flavor and illuminate their surroundings? What's lost when believers withhold themselves?

- How comfortable are you being the center of attention? Is calling attention to yourself essential to being salt and light?
- How would you describe the flavor of your faith in God? How does your flavor of faith season those with whom you interact?

EMBRACING THE TRUTH

You may be tempted to overlook how much influence you wield through your prayers. Depending on when and how often you pray, you might not feel you spend enough time praying for other people. When you recognize your prayers make a difference—for them and for you—it's more than worth the time and deliberation required to make praying for others something you've pre-decided to do.

Being sensitive to the voice of God's Spirit, you may often have someone unexpectedly come to mind. You may not even know their need or their name, only that God has brought them to mind. While you may feel prompted to do more for them, you can certainly begin to add value simply by praying for them.

In addition to praying for the needs of others, you will also want to pray for other believers and the influence they exert. Prayers of protection and victory over the enemy are also significant ways we can influence and empower one another as we seek to be salt and light.

² Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. ³ And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. ⁴ Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. ⁵ Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. ⁶ Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

COLOSSIANS 4:2-6

- Who are the people you tend to pray for regularly? How often do you ask them for prayer requests or check in with them about what they need?
- Who are the people you see or interact with regularly who also need your prayers? Who in particular do you want to be intentional about praying for over the next few weeks?
- Who are some brothers and sisters in Christ whose influence you admire? Why are you drawn to the way they relate to others?
- Who can you ask for a prayer request today that will stretch you out of your comfort zone? How can praying for others allow you to risk in faithfulness?

CHOOSING HOW YOU CHOOSE



No matter how introverted or homebound you may be, technology allows everyone to have more influence than ever before. You don't have to be an official influencer to find ways to connect, respond, and encourage others online. Whether

you send a text to let a friend know you're praying for them or post a response that questions a popular opinion, you reflect Christ by offering salt and light.

Most people not only have the capability to be a faith-influencer online but also across their various network of relationships, interactions, and affiliations. You may not realize how vast your influence is until you consider how many different people, groups, teams, and families you touch in your life right now. While you may not have obvious opportunities to share your faith or discuss spiritual things, you can still pray for them and remain vigilant when such opportunities eventually emerge.

Spend a few moments in prayer, stilling your heart before God and asking the Holy Spirit to speak and direct you according to his will and purposes. Then brainstorm the various connections you have and the influence you wield, using the questions and prompts below.

FAMILY MEMBERS

- Who are the family members, both immediate and extended, you influence regularly? Write their names below and then, beside each, name a specific need or item you can pray for them.

Name:	What/how you can pray for them:

COWORKERS, COLLEAGUES, BOSSES, PEERS

- Who are the career, work, and job-related individuals with whom you have some influence? List them below and ways you can pray for them.

Name:	What/how you can pray for them:

NEIGHBORS, FRIENDS, COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- What about neighbors, friends, or community members you know well enough to have an influence on? How can you pray for them?

Name:	What/how you can pray for them:

CONNECTIONS, ACQUAINTANCES, SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Finally, what about those special connections, familiar acquaintances, and service providers? List their names and how you can pray for them.

Name:	What/how you can pray for them:

DETERMINING YOUR DECISIONS

Choosing to take risks in order to wield the influence you have with others often becomes, well, risky. You may recall the experience I describe in chapter 4.1 of *Think Ahead* in which I agreed to meet a well-known (and not necessarily for good reasons) community member for lunch and ended up sitting at the bar in a popular, crowded restaurant. Before I got back to my office at the church, two informants had called to rattle on what they had heard or witnessed.

Basically, as I pointed out, you can choose to be someone who eats with sinners—you know, the people others tend to judge, condemn, criticize, or hold strong opinions about—or you can refrain from hanging out with others who have a bad reputation in order not to give anyone the idea that you’ve slipped in your faith and now do the same things these people are known for doing.

Either way, you can’t control what other people will think and say about you. So why not follow the example Jesus set for us? Which is to err on the side of relationship.

- Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you were in the wrong place for the right reasons? Did you receive criticism or comments from others about taking this risk?
- Would you be (or have you been) willing to meet someone in a bar or other establishment you don't normally frequent in order to deepen your relationship?
- What are some boundaries you refuse to cross in terms of "eating with sinners" and being salt and light in the world?
- Who is someone you know whom others tend to judge or criticize? Write out a prayer for this person that includes your willingness to meet with them and talk with them about the love of Jesus.

LESSON 9

I WILL INFLUENCE WITH MY EXAMPLE AND WORDS

Because you are a light, you don't run from the darkness, you shine in it. . . . Because you are salt, you don't run from the impurities, you cleanse them, and God uses you as an agent of change.²⁶

CRAIG GROESCHEL

Never underestimate the influence you can have on others simply by showing up.

Writer Nancy Fidler tells about how her father, who suffered from Parkinson's disease, worked as a special ed teacher at a Chicago high school in their neighborhood. For nearly thirty years after his diagnosis, Mr. Fidler continued to teach and love his students, treating them with the same respect, dignity, and compassion he believed every student deserved.²⁷

By the time he was in his sixties, Mr. Fidler often struggled with the pain, fatigue, and consequences caused by Parkinson's but continued to persevere. One morning when he went to the school, he lost his balance going up some stairs and fell. Despite being sore and bruised, he didn't consider going home and proceeded to teach his classes. Throughout the day he began to feel better and walk normally with more pep in his step.

This caught the attention of a teen student who popped into his classroom at the end of the day. She wasn't in any of Mr. Fidler's classes, but she recognized him and knew about his illness. She had witnessed his fall on the stairs that morning as well as the way he immediately got up and continued on. When she spotted him in between classes, she noticed that he seemed undeterred by his fall and eventually began walking as he normally did. So at the end of the day, she stepped into his classroom and told Mr. Fidler, "I just want to say thank you for saving my life."²⁸

She went on to explain her depression and battle with suicidal thoughts. This young woman had begun the morning intending to take her own life. But observing Mr. Fidler's example of strength and perseverance through suffering inspired her to keep going. "I then realized that everything will get better as the days go on," she concluded.

Mr. Fidler had no idea of the way his example had influenced this student. When he shared the story with his daughter Nancy, she was not surprised. Her father's example had been inspiring her for her entire life.

- When has someone else's example helped you get through a tough day or challenging season? Did they realize they were inspiring you to persevere?

- How much does another person's example influence the way you act? At work, for instance, how much does someone else's example of leadership impact your own?

- How aware are you of setting an example for those around you on a daily basis? If you asked them, how would they describe the example you set?
- How would you describe the example you want to set for everyone around you? What sometimes interferes with your attempt to set this kind of example?

EXPLORING GOD'S WORD



Sometimes our examples have the greatest impact on those in need of acceptance, understanding, compassion, and hope. People tend to notice how others treat them, with their attitude and words as well as their body language and actions. If you're paying attention, you've probably spotted this kind of communication within seconds of talking to a waitress, cashier, or customer service rep. Their job requires them to serve you, but depending on a variety of factors, they may not be eager to serve.

In those moments, the opportunity shifts to you and your example. Regardless of the message you're receiving from them, you can decide to make your interaction one that surprises them by adding value or one that reinforces their bias against customers in your demographic. You can make it a power struggle to emphasize that you as the customer should always be right.

Or, you can make it a relational interaction that reflects how Jesus engaged with people—surprising them with respect, grace, and the truth told in love. This is the example we see in his encounter with someone who never imagined the impact a drink of water could have on their lives.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

¹¹ “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

¹³ Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

¹⁷ “I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

¹⁹ “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

²¹ “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

JOHN 4:7-26

- What message did Jesus convey to the Samaritan woman merely by speaking to her? How did his request change her expectations about their interaction?
- Why do you suppose Jesus compared what he offered to living water? How does the Samaritan woman initially interpret this offer?
- Why do you suppose Jesus does not confront the woman about her husbands and current relationship status? How does his lack of condemnation redirect the woman's attention?
- How does the example Jesus set in this encounter inspire you to see others beyond their appearance or first impression?

EMBRACING THE TRUTH



Following the example Jesus set often compels us to cross social and cultural barriers and to disrupt stereotypes. Sometimes people respond, similar to the way the Samaritan woman initially responded to Jesus, by wearing the labels others have given them. Because so many others have spoken to them or acted certain ways, they assume you will as well. Which is where the brilliance of Jesus' divine relational style can inspire us.

We can't ignore that certain boundaries, stereotypes, and prejudices exist. So recognizing the treatment others have likely received can help you see them beyond the labels and demographics. Most people continue to be surprised when another person pauses to listen, to look, and to know them for who they really are. Rather than trying to convince them of anything or get something from them, you wield considerable influence simply by being present and looking beyond surface appearances, social context, and cultural assumptions.

- Who are the people you tend to avoid or feel uncomfortable around? How can you show them the love of Jesus simply by your attitude?

- When have you recently interacted with another person whom you assumed was very different from you in their beliefs and lifestyle? How would you describe your interaction with them?

- What are some ways you can acknowledge social and cultural labels on others without succumbing to them in your words and example?

- Who is someone you see regularly but have not gotten to know because you assume, for whatever reasons, they're not interested? How can you take a first step toward engaging with this person?

CHOOSING HOW YOU CHOOSE

When you pre-decide to be an influencer, you choose your words carefully and think before you act. While surprising others with how we relate can get their attention, you want to make sure it's a favorable surprise. You don't need to have a script you follow or memorize Bible verses to quote. You simply need to be yourself and show others that you genuinely care about them.

Just as Jesus interacted with the woman at the well, you want to relate to others, regardless of their differences or similarities to you, with respect, grace, and kindness. Jesus used his words to engage the Samaritan woman in conversation, surprising her with his disregard for the cultural boundaries of her ethnicity and gender. When he offered her living water and revealed his identity as the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus kept the focus on the woman and her needs—not on his sovereignty, righteousness, or power. He remained relational and offered grace and mercy instead of shame and judgment.

What's also striking in their encounter is how the Samaritan woman then immediately left her water jar, returned to town, and used her words to offer testimony about meeting Jesus: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" (John 4:29). And how did they respond? "They came out of the town and made their way toward him" (John 4:30).

Without shame or hesitation, she acknowledged her tarnished reputation and shared how Jesus told her everything she ever did. Instead of demanding or urging others to believe in Christ, she asked the same question she herself had just finished asking: "Could this be the Messiah?" Asking questions rather than proclaiming statements—even ones that are true—often invites others to engage rather than causing them to put up defenses. Townspeople gathered and began to head toward Jesus simply because this woman spoke up.

Her words led others to encounter Christ for themselves, and the results changed their lives: "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony. . . . They said to the woman, 'We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world'" (John 4:39, 42).

You have the opportunity to speak up as well. Just as she saw an opportunity to share her Jesus-encounter with others, you can look for moments when it's natural to let others know what Jesus means to you. You can also look for

opportunities to invite your friends, neighbors, and coworkers to a church service, holiday event, or small group where they can encounter Jesus more directly.

You don't have to be a good speaker, have a large platform, or have your life together to influence others by telling them about Jesus. You simply have to speak up.

- What often prevents you from speaking up and telling others about your faith? Are you more concerned about knowing what to say or about how others might respond?

- How does the Samaritan woman's example strike you? What can you learn from the simple way she let others know about what had happened in her life because of meeting Jesus?

- When was the last time you spoke candidly about your faith in God with a friend, colleague, neighbor, or acquaintance? What prompted you to speak up?

- When was the last time you invited someone to visit your church, attend a faith-related event, or check out your small group?

DETERMINING YOUR DECISIONS

Pre-deciding to use your influence by praying, speaking, and setting an example requires patience. While you remain vigilant for everyday opportunities to influence others around you, many times your cumulative testimony has a greater impact. Rarely does a one-time conversation or exchange lead someone to accept Christ. More often, their decision is the result of relationships developed over time.

When you live out being salt and light, gradually people will notice and be curious. When you let your light shine, they will be attracted to the light. They will want what you have. And then you can share your greatest treasure more directly. You can help them know—through what you say and what you do—the unconditional love of God displayed through his sinless son, Jesus.

So remember, influence is often a long game. When you're tempted to give up on someone, don't stop praying. Don't stop believing. And don't give up. You are salt and light. You run into the darkness, and you shine the love of Jesus into it. God made you to make a difference, and you need to just be who you are.

You have influence—and you know how to use it.

- Who are the nonbelievers with a front-row seat to your life right now? How is your example influencing them?

- Who have you stopped engaging or interacting with because they seemed uninterested or hostile to your faith? While respecting their wishes, how can you continue to befriend them?

- Who have you been praying for over a long period of time in hopes you can share your faith with them? What's a next step you can take toward getting closer to them?

- How will you be more intentional in using your influence now than you would have a month ago? Why?