

influencing like Jesus

15 BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES
OF PERSUASION

Michael Zigarelli

with Carolyn Stanford Goss

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Introduction

I tried to get one of my kids to eat peas the other day. It wasn't pretty. I insisted; he resisted. Locked in a stalemate, I had to pull out the influence principles covered in this book. And for this battle it looked like I might need all fifteen principles.

In the span of about thirty seconds, I mentally rifled through some options. I could use the "authority" principle ("do it because I say so"); I could use the "social evidence" principle ("look how nicely your brother is eating his peas"); I could use the "limited availability" principle ("I'm setting the timer—you have two minutes to be done"); I could take the softer approach of focusing on some benefit for him ("did you know that eating vegetables makes you grow tall?"); I could try to be likable ("you make me so proud when you eat your veggies"); I could even tell him an inspirational story ("let me tell you about some kids I saw in Brazil who spend their day begging for food").

In the end, though, I defaulted to the old, efficient standby: creating consequences. Eat or else. Since the "or else" was one part credible and two parts uncomfortable, it culminated in the boy's compliance. But in an epilogue of silent protest, he swallowed each pea like a pill, placing one at a time in the back of his throat and washing it down with a big gulp of water.

Well, problem solved—at least until next time. And unfortunately, next time was the next dinner.

Friends, this is *not* influence. I have to admit, too, that it's not uncommon for me either. When it comes to being

genuinely influential and producing long-term change, I probably fail more than I succeed. That's why I've delved into Scripture to pull out God's principles of persuasion. There's got to be a better way.

As it turns out, there are a lot of better ways. God's ways. What I've discovered as I've studied and taught about influence principles over the past couple of years is that the Judeo-Christian Scriptures offer all sorts of instruction about becoming more influential. From Genesis to Revelation, an abundance of divine counsel is available to those of us who want to make a difference in the world—or at least our small corner of it.

Before I share a preview of that counsel, let me address something that's nagged at many of my Christian students who have studied influence principles. *Influence is not manipulation*. Rather, to *influence* means “to effect or to produce some sort of change in attitude, behavior, or circumstances.” It's a value-neutral concept, and the influence principles in this book are also value neutral. We can choose to use these principles for good or for evil, but the principles themselves are neither good nor evil, per se.

Influence is not manipulation. *Influence* simply means “to effect or produce some sort of change in attitude, behavior, or circumstances.”

Think about it this way: I can use a hammer to build a deck onto my house or to break all of its windows. The hammer itself is neither good nor bad; it's just a tool. *How I use that tool* is what's good or bad. In the same way these influence principles are simply tools; and if you learn to use them well, you'll have a significantly upgraded tool

kit to be a more effective agent of change in the sphere of influence God has entrusted to you.

Here's another way we know that it's legitimate to use the influence principles described in this book: Jesus used every one of them when he walked among us.

That's an important starting point. It's relatively easy to find examples of persuasion in the Bible—examples of people who have been influential through whatever means available—but that's not Bible study. That's simply proof-texting, and it can lead us to some erroneous conclusions about what's permissible in God's eyes. So as a guardrail against that, my operating assumption in doing research for this book has been this: if Jesus did it, then we can be pretty confident that it's OK for us to do it, too.

You'll find a lot of examples in this book from people other than Jesus—examples from Paul, Nathan, Solomon, Nehemiah, Daniel, and so on—but you'll find no influence principle covered that we cannot infer directly from Jesus' teaching or actions.

God Wants You to Be an Influencer

You might be one of those folks who ask another good question about this topic: *why study influence in the first place?* Let me tell you, it's about so much more than peas at the dinner table. In fact, that example is trivial compared to the enormity of God's invitation in this area. God calls us to be influencers in several different realms, every day of our lives.

Did you ever consider that? God has given us a Great Commission, a mandate to make disciples, to encourage people to consider the claims of Jesus Christ, and to make a persuasive case for Christ through who we are and what we say. *That's a call to influence.*

And beyond this Great Commission, God gives us a Cultural Commission, an instruction to shape our workplaces, our schools, our public policies, our media, and our entire society in ways that please him. There's nothing less than a cultural war going on out there—a battle for our hearts and minds and for the hearts and minds of our children—and God doesn't want us Christians on the sidelines in that battle. He wants us on the front lines; and, frankly, he wants us to win those battles. *That's a call to influence.*

And even beyond the Great Commission and the Cultural Commission, God gives us a Domestic Commission to train up our kids in the way they should go (Prov. 22:6)—to teach them to love God and neighbor—and to be salt and light to our spouses and to others in our household, gently but effectively shepherding them ever closer to God. *That's a call to influence.*

God gives us a Great Commission,
a Cultural Commission, and a
Domestic Commission. Each of these
is a call to influence.

God gives us opportunities all around us every day to influence people and circumstances. Whether you're a concerned citizen writing a letter to the editor, or a pastor stepping into the pulpit, or a teacher instructing your class, or a stay-at-home mom shaping your children's worldview, or a manager trying to grow your organization or lead your people God's way, or an activist trying to convince your legislature to change a law, or an evangelistically-minded believer encouraging someone to consider seriously the claims of Jesus Christ, or even if you're just a dad trying to get your kids to eat their peas, everyday influence opportunities abound. Thanks be to God that he hasn't

left us on our own to figure out how to do this stuff! He's revealed to us in Scripture more than a dozen influence principles, and he gives us his Holy Spirit to empower us to do it successfully.

That empowerment is actually the launch point for this book's subject. It's Principle 1. Indeed, we can choose to use these influence principles in our own strength, but there's a better way. As with everything in life, God wants us to co-labor with him and to rely on him to make a real difference in this world. Being a change agent is not just another thing for our to-do list. It's a central part of our purpose. It's a divine calling and even a sacred way of life, a habit of being God's conduit to get people onto God's agenda. He's the influencer; we're just the vessels, using his principles his way to do his work.

How This Book Is Organized

Let me offer you a quick road map to how I've structured this book. Each chapter is a short, focused discussion of one of the fifteen principles I've discovered about how Jesus influenced people. You can read this book alone and find much that you can put into practice. Maybe you absorb material best where you can reflect on it in a quiet setting.

Or maybe you just want to study with a partner. I strongly encourage you to consider reading and studying it in a collaborative way, even if it's just two or three of you together, because you'll benefit *immeasurably* from others' ideas about how to use these principles in your life.

At the end of each chapter, I'll offer a "For Reflection" section that contains questions for you to think about. This section will help you get practical and personal because: the more personally applicable the material, the more learning and growth takes place.

Therefore, there will be a strong focus on applying each influence principle *to your specific influence challenges*. I encourage you to get a notebook and to journal some responses to the reflection questions so that you can solidify your understanding of these principles.

May I challenge you to reflect on these questions as your first journal entry:

- Is there a person or two in your life whom you'd like to influence in some meaningful way?
- Is there a particularly difficult conflict that's been festering for a long time, one for which you've not been able to make much progress?
- Is there a big opportunity before you that requires you to be more persuasive than you've been in the past?

By the time you finish this book, you'll have at least fifteen fresh ideas for how you can be a better influencer in that situation and with that person or persons. In short, you'll have an "influence plan," so you don't have to keep approaching that situation the same way anymore.

You'll be able to apply each influence principle to your specific influence challenges so you can take away a personal "influence plan."

Sound intriguing? I hope so. But for some I've taught, it sounds a little strange. "Plan my influence?" they ask. "Does it really have to be that premeditated? That much work? That formal?"

If you're wondering the same thing, consider this: When things matter, we often create some sort of plan. Can you imagine wanting to send your kids off to college

someday without creating a financial plan to do so? Can you imagine a builder starting construction without an architectural plan? Or a professional coach stepping onto a field without a game plan? Or a business trying to grow without a strategic plan? Or a general engaging the enemy without a battle plan? Or a teacher stepping up to the lectern without some sort of lesson plan?

When something's important, we plan. So why do we approach our significant influence challenges without an influence plan?

We shouldn't, and we don't have to. To get you started, in the back of this book you'll find an easy-to-use but surprisingly powerful Influence Planning Worksheet. Try it. Work through it one time to construct a new path forward in a conflict or opportunity you're currently facing. If you're serious about being a more godly influencer—at home, at work, at church, in the neighborhood, in the mission field, in the classroom or the courtroom or the board room—get serious about planning an influence strategy.

Influence matters. It matters a lot because God wants us to be influencers. He'll help you with this if you sincerely ask him. So let's turn to that very issue now—the issue of co-laboring with God—in Principle 1.

PART 1

Before You Ever Say a Word

Thank you for embarking on this journey with me! It's my hope and prayer that God will do something special in your life through *Influencing like Jesus*, so that you can do some special things for him in return.

The first three influence principles that we'll cover in this book might be more accurately called "pre-influence principles." They are three things we should do before we ever say a word to try to influence somebody or some situation.

Did you ever think about that? So often we simply go charging in with our solutions or arguments, having done little groundwork in preparation. Whether we're seeking to resolve a conflict, to change somebody's mind, or to encourage someone to alter their behavior, we often just react, defaulting to whatever influence approach we normally take.

Not a great idea. That's a little like taking a test without studying for it.

We can do better than this, and God wants to help us to do better. *Before we ever say a word to try to influence someone, we should do at least three things that he teaches us in Scripture*, as we'll see in the next three chapters:

- Pray for change.

- Be a person others will follow.
- Know your audience.

This has the potential to be an important journey for both of us, and I'm grateful you're taking the time to join me. God wants us to be influencers, as we said in the introduction to this book, and he's about to show us how to do that.

— PRINCIPLE 1 —

Pray for Change

This principle may be so self-evident that it seems trite even to say it. It's like a throwaway line, an obligatory statement all Christian authors or pastors must make to assure their audience that they're one of the faithful. Or maybe it's one of those things Christian publishers automatically include in their practical resources lest the resources seem too secular. Whatever the reason, it's little more than stating the obvious, right?

But humor me. Let me say it anyway, just to get it on the record: *Prayer changes things*. It's the starting point for influence. We shouldn't go charging ahead independently and self-sufficiently but, instead, co-labor with God to persuade people. After all, God does the changing. We're merely the instruments he's using to effect the change.

In fact, Scripture says that “in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). *In everything*. That includes our attempts to influence people and circumstances. And it's modeled throughout the Bible. There are countless examples.

The patriarchs prayed for change. Genesis says, for example, that “Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female slaves” (Gen. 20:17).

Moses prayed for change. When God had heard enough complaining from his people, he sent fire to surround their

camp. But Moses “prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down” (Num. 11:2).

The prophets prayed for change. *A lot.* Jeremiah prayed so much that one time God even insisted he stop interceding for the people of Judah, apparently so that God’s plans would go forward! (Jer. 7:16).

Jesus himself teaches us to pray for
change. He says, “Keep asking, and
it will be given to you.”

The psalmists prayed for change—to be restored in their relationship with God (e.g., Ps. 51), to be healed (e.g., Ps. 6), for safety (e.g., Ps. 57), and even that God would strike down their enemies (e.g., Ps. 109).

Jabez prayed for a change in the size of his territory—that God would “extend my border”—and Scripture says that “God granted his request” (1 Chron. 4:10).

Jesus’ brother James tells us directly to pray for change, explaining that “you do not have because you do not ask” (James 4:2) and that a prayer offered in faith can make a sick person well (James 5:13–15).

Most instructively, Jesus himself teaches us to pray for change. He says, “Keep asking, and it will be given to you” (Matt. 7:7). He tells his disciples, “Anything you ask the Father in My name, He will give you” (John 16:23). He modeled the principle, too, praying that God would transform us into the kind of people who would draw many to him (see John 17:21).

If it’s so clear that prayer changes things,
and if so many of us Christians desire
change, why do so *few* of us have a
healthy and active prayer life?

All of these prayers—and so many others in the Bible—are prayers to influence people and circumstances. Indeed, prayer changes things. But here’s the problem: *if it’s so clear that prayer changes things, and if so many of us Christians desire change in ourselves and others, why do so few Christians have a healthy and active prayer life?*

A Quick Confession

OK, confession time: My question comes from uncomfortable firsthand experience with the problem. Please don’t misunderstand me: I believe that every verse cited above is true. I believe that they come from God himself, through inspired writers of his choosing. Still, though I’m a Christian and even a teacher of Christians, I’ve wrestled for years with this question of whether prayer changes things. And here’s the kicker: the more Christians I talk to at the heart level, the more I realize that I’m not alone. In fact, those of us who struggle with the nature of prayer may even be in the majority.

I’ve seen some studies that support my unscientific conclusions. But you may not need empirical evidence to relate to what I’m saying. Maybe you’re wanting to ask this same question, or you know someone else who might be. If so, let’s look together at a root cause of our disbelief—the reason we neglect to pray for change.

Why We Don’t Pray for Change

Why is it that churchgoing, Bible-believing Christians—people who nod at verses like “Keep asking, and it will be given to you” (Matt. 7:7)—still neglect to invite God into our attempts to persuade people? What’s the root cause? Is it just that in our hurry we forget to talk to God? Sometimes, perhaps, but I think the problem runs

far deeper than dashing. More likely, it's a result of being marinated daily in a culture of disbelief.

Although the vast majority of Americans believe in God, the majority of that majority also thinks we can't know much about God. After all, they reason, how can you *really know* anything about the supernatural? Yes, we believe God exists, and we may even be able to infer some things about God's power and transcendence from looking at his creation. But whether he actually *gets involved* in his creation and *listens and responds* to our petitions, who can say? The Bible? It makes claims about all these things, but even among Christians fewer than one in three even believes that moral absolutes exist! So much for God revealed through Scripture. So much for knowing God. Relativism rules, even in the church.¹

This is what I mean by "a culture of disbelief." We live in a society where the predominant worldview is secularism, a presumption that says it's not possible to know anything *with certainty* about the supernatural. After a couple hundred years of this cultural drift, it's no surprise that the disbelief has penetrated our churches.

Experiment with this premise, if you'd like. See for yourself. To ten people who are not Christians, say something about the supernatural realm—something like, "We can know God's will for our lives," or "God speaks to us," or "Satan is a liar." Then count how many blank stares you get in response. I'll bet there'll be at least seven. Replicate this experiment with Christians, and you'll probably get at least five.

Now stay with me because this takes us back full circle to the issue of prayer. If we live in a culture that's agnostic about whether God is truly knowable, then we live in a culture that's agnostic about whether prayer changes things. And as you probably know, we see this doubt reinforced every day through TV shows, movies, the print media, music, public education, and even many of our laws. Is it

any surprise, then, that we also are infected? It's such a gradual poisoning, though, that we don't even realize it's happening.

Until, that is, someone asks us about the quality of our prayer life, and we're suddenly too embarrassed to be honest. *How did that drift happen?* we wonder. *Why don't I communicate with God more? Why don't I pray for change anymore?*

Maybe, just maybe, it's because we've been slowly conformed to that ubiquitous culture of disbelief. Maybe we no longer truly believe (if we ever did) that prayer makes a difference in what happens in our lives, and maybe we've ingested so much of this cultural toxin that it's transformed our spiritual DNA.

So maybe, just maybe, it's time to allow God to transform it back, once and for all.

A Long-standing Problem, a Timeless Solution

Let me underscore that this skepticism about the power of prayer is a long-standing problem, not just a contemporary one. It's exemplified clearly in one story told in the book of Acts. Peter is in prison and about to be executed. His friends are praying for his release—praying but apparently not fully believing that their prayers will make a difference. Look at the text:

On the night before Herod was to bring him out [for execution], Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, while the sentries in front of the door guarded the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. Striking Peter on the side, he woke him up and said, "Quick, get up!" Then the chains fell off his wrists. "Get dressed," the angel told him, "and

put on your sandals.” And he did so. “Wrap your cloak around you,” he told him, “and follow me.” So he went out and followed, and he did not know that what took place through the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. After they passed the first and second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened to them by itself. They went outside and passed one street, and immediately the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel and rescued me from Herod’s grasp and from all that the Jewish people expected.” When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many had assembled and were praying. He knocked at the door in the gateway, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer. She recognized Peter’s voice, and because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gateway.

“You’re crazy!” they told her. But she kept insisting that it was true. Then they said, “It’s his angel!” Peter, however, kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astounded. (Acts 12:6–16)

“You’re crazy”? “They were astounded”? To be candid, I might have said the same thing and felt the same way. And so would many longtime Christians that I know.

That’s just the point. We don’t pray because we doubt, and even when we do pray, we doubt. Scripture teaches us, though, that if we want to make more of a difference in this world, whether it’s in the lives of a million people or only one, it begins by rebuking this doubt (see James 1:5–7; Heb. 11:6), by asking God’s forgiveness, by letting him cleanse us of our cultural contamination, and by believing

his Son's teaching that prayer changes things. Jesus said about prayer that anyone who "does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him" (Mark 11:23). This, then, is our timely solution to the timeless problem of disbelief: ask God to give us a confident expectation that our prayers matter.

Jesus said about prayer that anyone who "does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him."

Is this something you need to deal with before going any further? Do a quick self-assessment to find out. Reflect back on your recent attempts to persuade somebody of something. How much of a role did prayer play in that attempt? Was communication with God part of your process, or do you normally go at this alone? In the same way, watch yourself over the next week or so, especially a few days after reading today's study. Observe your approach to persuading people and see whether you're habitually asking for God's guidance.

What we do exposes what we believe. So look at what you do and then, if necessary, do whatever it takes to align your beliefs with God's Word. Remember, influence does not begin with a set of persuasion principles or with a set of tactics or even with honing your arguments until they're airtight: it begins by seeking God and inviting him to do the influencing through you.

For Reflection

Pray for change. Each day brings abundant opportunities to put this principle into practice. Consider how widely applicable it is. On any given day, you might want to:

- Encourage your kids to behave better.
- Persuade your mate to change his or her mind about something important.
- Influence your boss to be fairer or nicer or more generous.
- Convince a teacher to change his or her approach to educating your child.
- Secure a refund from a customer service representative.
- Invite a sibling or friend to accept the claims of Jesus.
- Petition God to end a war or eliminate abortion or install leaders who will honor him.
- Achieve a personal change of heart so you can finally enjoy inner peace.

Indeed, every day we want to be influential. So let me encourage you to try something practical: identify the most pressing situation in your life where you'd like to see some sort of change—where you'd personally like to be more influential. Pick something significant, perhaps a situation that you've been trying to affect for years, a situation where you need some fresh insight into how to be more persuasive. Record in your notebook or journal what your personal challenge is.

Now, with that as your target, look for opportunities to work on this situation as you explore the influence principles that follow Principle 1, "Pray for change." If you prefer, pick two or three influence challenges instead of one. Regardless of the number, your goal should be to develop a practical plan of action full of new ideas about how to have more influence in the situation you've identified.

Lastly but most essentially, before you move on to something else today, take the first step toward greater influence and *pray for the changes you'd like to see in this*

situation, believing that God will intervene. And beyond that, commit to continuing this conversation with God throughout your reading of this book. Influence toward permanent transformation begins here, this very moment, with these very prayers.