

Influenced: A guide to changing our thinking

Part 3: In Good Company

Proverbs 13:20

How can we experience positive influences in our relationships?

INTRO: I'm Aaron, part of Crosscreek's leadership team and normally help host these episodes, but going to give the message this week. Jon's taking a break and family vacation this week. Well deserved.

ME: I'm not perfect, but would say I've made some good choices in my life. Marrying Monica.

Becoming a teacher. Gotten to work at my job with some of the most amazing humans on the planet. May surprise you that most of these incredible people are 12-14 years old and only some of them are adults.

Moving to Oregon from Wisconsin/Minnesota. Bye bye summer humidity and hello... record-breaking heat? Wait, maybe not the BEST example...

Also made some not so good decisions. **Pretty much anything I wear.**

Transplanting a rose bush in August (took me 30 min just to dig the tiny hole. Of course, the rose died.)

My current haircut.

Apparently I was also kind of on the edge when I was a teenager between good and not so good life directions. My Dad likes to tell the story of keeping a close eye on the friends I was choosing. The way he tells the story, once he saw my middle and high school friends and the type of people they were, he knew I was heading in the right direction.

That's pretty much the way it went for me growing up. I mean, we were SUPER goofy, but my friends at that age were basically good people who never got in super big trouble.

Thankful to experience grace from park wardens and police kicking us out of closed parks late at night as we loudly played basketball in the snow in the winter or skinny dipped in the lake at the closed county park on humid summer nights. Good times...

I do wonder how my life would be different if I'd chosen different friends & gotten into some real actual trouble, though. Maybe you can relate OR maybe you were someone who DID experience some hardship from your childhood friendships?

WE: After all, our friends influence us, and like we've already seen in this series... **Our influences determine the quality of our lives.**

(1st episode)... "How we think dictates how we live and our thoughts are products of our influences. We can let Jesus renew our thoughts, thereby renewing our lives."

Also like food... **Our informational influences can either be poisonous, empty, or life-giving.**

(2nd episode)... “The sources of information we choose influence us. We need to evaluate them- are they true? Honorable? Right? Pure? Lovely? Admirable? We can carefully consider our informational influences, then choose to consume them or not.”

And, though we may have PERSONAL HABITS associated with sources of information that influence us (certain news sources, media platforms, times & places when we consume them) , we have even closer RELATIONAL CONNECTIONS to the people that influence us.

For many of us, when we think about our most powerful influences, they are NOT things, but PEOPLE. That’s because... **Our personal relationships exert powerful influences on us.**

Here’s the problem: Allow others (who are just as influenced as us) to influence us. Oftentimes, it’s the blind leading the blind and no one seems to know where anyone is really going.

Maybe it’s not even quite that bad for us, but we just simply don’t like where we’re headed, how we feel and act around certain people, or where we are in at least one relationship in our life.

What if we feel like our friends are keeping us from who we should be? What if we are sick of the negativity, gossip, anger, and complaining that our relationships bring our way?

In essence, and this is the big question for this episode, how can we be positively influenced to grow in and through healthy relationships?

Some wisdom from 3,000 years ago that still works today...

GOD: Prov 13:20- Often called the “Wisdom” book/part of the Jewish scriptures. “Wisdom” basically meaning- applying knowledge well, having sound judgment. Pretty much the opposite of having poor discernment and making bad decisions.

Written by Solomon (widely considered one of “wisest” people of all time) and other “wise guys” from back in about 10th century B.C. Mostly about how to live well- practical stuff for good living.

Read V. 13:20 *Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble. (NLT version)*

Classic “this” or “that” cause and effect. This wisdom is like a coin, has 2 sides. Your life is going in one direction or the other. You are either experiencing positive or negative effects based on the relational influences you surround yourself with.

Relational influences can either build us up or tear us down.

Heads = “Walk with the wise and become wise;” Walk: meaning, spend time with, listen to someone who is wise, and become wise, yourself.

- For me, someone who is “wise” can cut through the noise and give clear, good advice. Right reactions for the place and time.

- Becoming wise by association happens all the time. People hang around wise leaders/mentors and become like them. Couple of examples...
 - John Lewis talking about what it was like to work alongside MLK, what he said, how he acted gracefully in the face of violence and hatred.
 - Jesus' disciples. A mixed bag of traitor outcasts, hot-headed fishermen, religious zealots, etc. All acted and sounded a LOT more like Jesus as they lived life with him.

Tails = *'associate with fools and get in trouble'*. Hang around with fools and suffer harm.

- For me, a "fool" doesn't think about how their words/actions will affect themselves or others, in the long-term and even short-term sometimes. Wrong reactions for the place and time.
 - See this a LOT with my middle school students. Just doing stuff "friends" are doing without thinking about it.
 - Some harmless (fashion choices, if I'm allowed to judge that).
 - Some harmful (bullying/gossiping/harmed relationships).
 - Also true for adults. We're not exempt from "foolishness" by any stretch. We say things we don't mean all of the time, even say mean things to others that we wish we could take back later- gossiping, complaining, saying negative things we know are untrue but secretly wish were actually. Even if we don't say these things, they still occupy our minds and camp out there, becoming hidden "foolish" influences of their own. Then they rear their dumb, ugly heads when we least expect it.

So... Is all of this relational stuff just unavoidable and random? You make a friend and just hope that the coin comes up heads for you and they turn out to be a wise influence on you so you can become wise, too? Is there any way to choose good influences with more certainty?

As Jon mentioned last week, the Apostle Paul certainly thought it was possible to do more than just depend on luck for good relationships. He believed his example was worth following for the 1st Century Jesus followers in Philippi and that it would provide good influence for them. Paul advised his mentees in his letter to them to...

Phil 4: 9 *Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.*

In the realm of relational influences, Paul was a positive example for the Philippians. He lived out his renewed thinking and encouraged them to do the same. He was a "wise" model for the young church at Philippi, showing them how to live as Jesus Followers instead of defaulting to their "foolish" past ways of living. Paul was saying they had a choice.

We have a choice- we can choose healthy relational influences.

That begs a question, however. Was Paul just basing all of this knowledge and wisdom on himself? Did he just make it up? Is he just really stuck up and does he think he's just better than us? You might be wondering who IS this Paul guy? I'm with you. That's totally fair.

Here's some context for you... Just a bit earlier in his letter to the Philippians, Paul reminded his readers of his relational resume- the one that detailed his absolute perfection in following the Jewish law to be right in his relationship with God. You have to admit his perfection makes for quite the resume. Then Paul wrote this.

Phil 3:7-8 *I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ.*

Paul thought he had everything right in his relationship with God before he met Jesus. He had all the “right” knowledge in his religious tradition and did all the “right” things. After he met Jesus, though, he considered it all garbage, or other translations say “nothing”, or even “all as loss”, in comparison to being in a relationship with Jesus.

Don’t miss this: Paul was pointing the people he was in relationship with in Philippi back to his own personal foundational relationship with Jesus. He was telling them they could do the same. That’s because Paul had experienced something transformational that he wanted to share with these Jesus followers 2,000 years ago that is still life-changing today-

Healthy relationships with others grow from a healthy relationship with Jesus.

YOU: So, hopefully you’re still with me at this point- you want healthy relationships. But you might be wondering how you can choose your relational influences “wisely” and grow in healthy relationships with others? After all, there’s only so much time and energy to commit to relationships, right? It’s not possible to have quality, growing relationships with EVERYONE. Is it right to just ignore and ditch some of your friends because of their “bad influence”? What should you do?

Try the following exercise to prioritize the positive influences of your “wisest” relationships this week. Remember, this is an exercise for you, no-one else needs to see it.

1st= Sketch a target made of 3 circles and label it. Put “cultivate” in the bullseye in the middle, “maintain” in the circle outside of that, and “evaluate” in the outermost circle. Relationships are kind of like vegetables in a garden. (I know, not a perfect analogy, but...) We can grow our relationships similar to how we might grow veggies. Just like homegrown vegetables can nourish and grow us, so can our relationships.

2nd= Think about the most important relational influences in your life. This would include all of your relational influences- family, people you live with, friends, neighbors, co-workers, schoolmates, distant family members, etc.

Then, write the names of those people on the target.

- For the “cultivate” bullseye, put names of people (probably kids/parents, close friends) whose relational influences are positive and with whom you most want to grow. This inner circle also likely includes people in your “Alliance” or Connect Group and maybe classmates or co-workers. Garden-wise, you wouldn’t just throw seeds on a weedy, overgrown lot and expect them to thrive. “Cultivate” relationships with these people by working on them with care, much as you would cultivate plants you care about in a garden. Prioritize these people and be intentional about spending quality time with them and growing with them.
- For the “maintain” circle, write the names of people in your life that you are not as close to or whose influence on you isn’t as positive. This might include people in your Connect Group, depending on who they are, or maybe neighbors or distant relatives. All garden plants need a bit of care once in a while- some weeding around them, pruning or watering. Spend time with and check in on these people as you can.
- For the “evaluate” outer circle, put names of those whose relational influence is unhealthy or negative for you or just potentially not heading in the right direction right now. Sometimes, despite our best intentions, places just get completely unruly with overgrown untended plants, or infiltrated with weeds. At this point, it’s a good

idea to take a moment and step back and think about what you should do next. For now, simply start by praying for these people and your relationships with them. Ask God to show you next steps and what healthy boundaries look like in these relationships. Consider counseling for you individually or both of you, if appropriate.

Then, this week... Be purposeful about your relational influences.

- (Same as last week) **Book of Philippians**- Daily reading. As you read, focus on what Paul writes about healthy relational influences from Jesus and other Jesus followers. Put these things into practice.
- **Review target, pray, spend time** with the people on it.
- I mentioned “alliances” earlier. Wondering what an “**alliance**” is? Want to explore positive influential relationships at Crosscreek like a whole church gathering or **small group** (Connect Group)? Let us know!

WE: This might all seem unimportant, overwhelming, or maybe even impossible, but imagine with me for a moment...

What if you found yourself becoming more and more the person you wanted to be, grown by positive relational influences encouraging and guiding you in a “wise”, Jesus-like direction?

What if you could look around in a few months and say... “Wow. I really do have the most amazing community around me!”

What if you were also “paying it forward” relationally and mentoring someone else or else's in a positive direction?

What if you were known for having a life-giving influence on people and drawing not just from your own limited resources, but from Jesus’ infinite well of love to do so?

All of these things can become a reality if we focus on healthy relational influences.

Healthy relational influences are grown in healthy relationships.

***Pause the video, get a piece of paper and do the “target” exercise before answering the questions.**

Questions

1. How have you seen God working in your life & world this past week?
2. How have you seen relational influences (healthy and/or not healthy) affect your life?
3. Read Philippians 3:7-8. How does your experience relate to Paul’s?
4. Look at/think about your “target”. What relational influences do you have? What do you want to do about them this week and how can your group pray for you?