

How to Influence People

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹ They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Are you one of the people like me who want to know how to influence people? You know, how to get your children or spouse or neighbor or friend to do what you know is best? Or maybe it is in the area of work – how to get your boss or coworkers to do things your way. Maybe it is in the area of politics, and you so clearly know how to solve the issues of our society, economy and educational systems. If only you or I were in charge!

At my job I often receive pamphlets and advertisements for workshops and seminars on how to manage people, especially difficult people. There are also websites devoted to “how to influence people.” Google says there are about 552 million results when we ask that question online. Dale Carnegie had some definite ideas and suggestions. Carnegie gives Twelve Ways to Win People to Your Way of Thinking:

1. **The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it.** Whenever we argue with someone, no matter if we win or lose the argument, we still lose. The other person will either feel humiliated or strengthened and will only seek to bolster their own position. We must try to avoid arguments whenever we can.

2. **Show respect for the other person's opinions. Never say "You're wrong."** We must never tell people flat out that they are wrong. It will only serve to offend them and insult their pride. No one likes to be humiliated, we must not be so blunt.
3. **If you're wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically.** Whenever we are wrong we should admit it immediately. When we fight we never get enough, but by yielding we often get more than we expected. When we admit that we are wrong people trust us and begin to sympathize with our way of thinking.
4. **Begin in a friendly way.** "A drop of honey can catch more flies than a gallon of gall."^[7] If we begin our interactions with others in a friendly way, people will be more receptive. Even if we are greatly upset, we must be friendly to influence people to our way of thinking.
5. **Start with questions to which the other person will answer yes.** Do not begin by emphasizing the aspects in which we and the other person differ. Begin by emphasizing and continue emphasizing the things on which we agree. People must be started in the affirmative direction and they will often follow readily. Never tell someone they are wrong, but rather lead them where we would like them to go with questions that they will answer "yes" to.
6. **Let the other person do a great deal of the talking.** People do not like listening to us boast, they enjoy doing the talking themselves. Let them rationalize and talk about the idea, because it will taste much sweeter to them in their own mouth.
7. **Let the other person feel the idea is his or hers.** People inherently like ideas they come to on their own better than those that are handed to them on a platter. Ideas can best be carried out by allowing others to think they arrived at it themselves.
8. **Try honestly to see things from the other person's point of view.** Other people may often be wrong, but we cannot condemn them. We must seek to understand them. Success in dealing with people requires a sympathetic grasp of the other person's viewpoint.
9. **Be sympathetic with the other person's ideas and desires.** People are hungry for sympathy. They want us to recognize all that they desire and feel. If we can sympathize with others, they will appreciate our side as well and will often come around to our way of thinking.
10. **Appeal to the nobler motives.** Everyone likes to be glorious in their own eyes. People believe that they do things for noble and morally upright reasons. If we can

appeal to others' noble motives we can successfully convince them to follow our ideas.

11. **Dramatize your ideas.** In this fast-paced world, simply stating a truth isn't enough. The truth must be made vivid, interesting, and dramatic. Television has been doing it for years. Sometimes ideas are not enough and we must dramatize them.

12. **Throw down a challenge.** The thing that most motivates people is the game. Everyone desires to excel and prove their worth. If we want someone to do something, we must give them a challenge and they will often rise to meet it.

I'm sure these are wonderful suggestions to follow and many have had successful management careers following Carnegie's model of leadership. However, Mark implies that Jesus had other ideas of how to influence people. John Calvin wrote that our scripture contains a "bright mirror of human vanity," because "it shows that proper and holy zeal is often accompanied by ambition, or some other vice of the flesh, so that they who follow Christ have a different object in view from what they ought to have." Indeed, the problems of vanity, ambition, and other vices are not limited to followers of Christ. These problems are as old as time and as current as the daily news. It is a common insight and accusation that those who would lead often seek their own benefit and glory rather than the benefit of others.

Wherever we look, whether in government, business, charity, the academy, or the church, we face the problem of how to align the interests of leaders with the interests and needs of their followers as well as with an overall mission. Our leaders and we ourselves frequently (in the words of Calvin) "have a different object in view from what they [we] ought to have."

To ambition and vanity, Mark adds dramatic irony in our scripture. Jesus had just foretold his coming condemnation, humiliation, and death ([10:32-34](#)), but James and John were dreaming of power and position. **James J. Thompson** James and John (:35) were among the first whom Jesus called to discipleship ([1:19-20](#)). Often in the company

of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew (1:16-18), they reappear throughout Mark as representatives of the Twelve (1:29; 3:17; 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33). Their approach to Jesus was striking. Obviously, they were cozying up to the teacher, lobbying for preferential treatment. "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (10:35). **C. Clifton Black** Not anticipating that Jesus would soon be on the cross, with a criminal on either side, they asked to be seated on his right and left in his coming glory. As Jesus told them, they literally did not know what they were asking. Nor did they catch on when Jesus asked them if they could drink from the same cup as he, and be baptized with the same baptism. They assured him that they could, and he assured them that they would. Eager to ease into positions of power and glory, the brothers did not realize that they would soon be called upon to sacrifice everything for their cause. When the other disciples heard of James and John's impudent request, they were upset—presumably because they too were dreaming of power and position and resented the brothers' bold attempt to get ahead.

Jesus presented a stark contrast to the disciples' conception of leadership, and thus to the prevailing conceptions of status and success in the ancient and modern worlds. For Jesus, the ruler must be a servant leader, not a tyrant. The goal is to serve, not to be served. Whoever would be first must be last. This vision of servant leadership is a powerful antidote to common notions that equate servanthood with lowly status and leadership with the ability to attain markers of success such as material acquisitions, prestige, and managerial or political power over others. We often fail to keep in view the proper object of our striving. Indeed, we frequently confuse the purposes and goal of our cause with our hope for personal success. Subsequently, even our best thoughts and actions tend to be tainted with vanity and ambition.

Jesus' rebuke of the disciples was not meant to be a counsel of cynicism or despair. His rebuke was a reminder to us that we should be cautious about expecting too much of mere humans. We should be careful, for example, not to pin our hopes for salvation on those who cannot bear the weight of our expectations. Any human being who is a self-

appointed savior is likely to be a disappointment. Recognize that even the best and most committed leaders among us are subject to vanity and ambition. Instead, the appropriate response to our incurable tendency to put ourselves first is to be cautious and self-reflective about our motives. Jesus showed compassion for the disciples even in their moment of weakness. We need to examine our motives as well. We should not accept the claims of anyone who sets himself or herself up to be another messiah, and we should be cautious not to develop a messianic complex of our own. Our proper response to human frailty is not to give up on the notion of leadership or action; it is to set up checks and balances within a community or organization. We must keep each other honest. We must be a community of accountability. On Wednesday Rev. Graves and I attended clergy boundary training and this is exactly the measures we were asked to put in place in our ministries.

We must also carefully consider the notion of self-sacrifice. In a powerful and moving act of self-sacrifice, Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. His sacrifice on the cross became the ultimate pattern of servant leadership and self-sacrificial love, and we are called to emulate this example. But self-sacrifice must not become self-denial as an end in itself. Self-sacrifice for a disciple of Jesus Christ must be in the service of something higher than the self. The promise of the gospel is that in the sacrifice of self for others, not only will a higher and better self emerge, but the reign of God will continue to unfold. Self-sacrifice is important, but so is self-care. Vanity and ambition are vices, but so are timidity and unconcern.

Against the image of the disciples squabbling over rank, we should remember the promises for the reward of faith in the Gospel of Mark. When we keep our minds on the unfolding reign of God, we lose the self-serving self and gain another, higher, better self. This higher, better self answers the call of Jesus Christ to be a disciple by serving others in the world. **James J. Thompson**

In light of this passage the words of Francis of Assisi take on even more meaning:

O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

There is nothing wrong with influencing people, but our motivation is to be of service, not to be served!

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