

How to Lose Friends and Win Enemies

Luke 4:21-30

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
January 31, 2010

It's an old book, first published in 1937, but it's still the gold standard in the self-help genre. Dale Carnegie's book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* has sold more than 15 million copies. I haven't read the book, but I did find a summary of the contents on the internet. Judging from the sections and sub-sections of the book, would have to surmise that Jesus didn't care too much for the Carnegie method of public speaking and leadership. Let me share a few of Carnegie's fundamental techniques and suggestions, and you can judge for yourself as to how well Jesus does or does not conform to Carnegie's ideals:

In the section titled "Fundamental Techniques," Carnegie advises, "Don't criticize, condemn, or complain. Give honest and sincere appreciation." Elsewhere Carnegie urges us to smile, and to "make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely."

How's Jesus doing so far?

As a strategy to "Win people to your way of thinking," Carnegie says that "the only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it." Furthermore, we should "show respect for the other person's opinion. Never say 'You're wrong.'" And, he says, we should "begin in a friendly way."

In the section titled, "Be a Leader: How to Change People without Giving Offense or Arousing Resentment," Carnegie tells us to "begin with praise and honest appreciation," and to "let the other person save face," and to "Use encouragement. Make the fault seem easy to correct."¹

After reading this morning's lesson from the fourth chapter of the Gospel According to Luke, I get the feeling that somehow Jesus wasn't around when Carnegie was filling auditoriums and convention centers with his inspirational messages on how to win friends and influence people. In fact, it would seem that Jesus learned the opposite principles, namely "How to Lose Friends and Win Enemies."

Jesus had just come home to Nazareth. He had become a renowned religious figure throughout the area, the focus of rumors and conversations about his teachings and his miracles. Now he was set to preach his first sermon in his home pulpit, something which I must admit can be a fearful prospect. I haven't had the opportunity to preach in the church where I grew up, but I can imagine the nervousness I would feel looking out into the congregation and seeing old teachers, friends I had grown up with, my parents and their friends.

So Jesus got up in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, with the people anxiously waiting to hear what the native son would have to say. Surely he would live up to his reputation.

¹For a complete list of the contents of Carnegie's major sections and core principles, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_to_Win_Friends_and_Influence_People

Jesus opened the scroll containing the writings of the prophet Isaiah, and he read these words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”²

Then he sat down and began to preach. The opening words of his sermon were, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”³ There was something about Jesus, something about his presence that impressed the people enough for Luke to indicate that they were “amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.”⁴

But their attitude toward Jesus quickly changed, as Jesus suddenly began to say things that offended their sensibilities. Instead of trying to win friends and influence people, Jesus delivered a message that only served to lose friends and win enemies. I’d like to share at least three ways Jesus contradicted the Carnegie method, three ways Jesus managed to alienate his hometown people and turn them against him.

One way Jesus alienated his people is in the way he refused to buy into their flattery and praise. Jesus said, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.”⁵ It is akin to the expression we hear today, “familiarity breeds contempt.” Jesus knew his people, and his people knew him. They knew his family and his upbringing, and there is part of them that couldn’t believe that they were hearing this son of a blue-collar worker speak so eloquently. But even more, Jesus knew the people to whom he was speaking. He knew their selfish motives. He knew their narrow opinions and their racial sensitivities. It is not likely the familiarity the people had of Jesus that bred the contempt here, but the familiarity that Jesus had of the people. Because he knew the people to whom he was speaking, he was able to see through their flattery and speak instead to the corruption in their hearts and attitudes.

Contrary to Dale Carnegie, Jesus didn’t “begin in a friendly way,” and he didn’t smile. He didn’t do so because he knew his people, and he knew what lay beneath the surface. Jesus refused to be drawn in by the flattery and praise.

Neither did Jesus avoid the argument. Jesus didn’t believe for one second that the only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it. To avoid an argument out of fear of offending others is to let things simmer in a pressure cooker that doesn’t have a release valve. Something’s gonna blow! Instead of tiptoeing around the sensitivities of his audience, Jesus charged right in with the tenderness of a bull in a china store. Jesus chose the more direct route.

It is a fact that most of us don’t like to have our cherished myths challenged, nor do we appreciate being pushed out of our comfort zones. The truth is that when Jesus sets about the task of saving us, it is not productive to avoid addressing those myths or prejudices that are contrary to the spirit of Christ.

Billy Sunday was the Billy Graham of a previous generation. He was conducting a crusade in a particular city. In one of his sermons he said something critical of the labor conditions for workers in that area. After the service, several prominent businessmen sent a message to him by one of the local pastors. The message was this: “Billy, leave labor matters alone. Concentrate on getting people saved. Stay away from political issues. You’re rubbing the fur the wrong way.”

² Luke 4:18-19, citing Isaiah 61:1-2

³ Luke 4:21

⁴ Luke 4:22

⁵ Luke 4:24

Billy Sunday sent this message back to them: “If I’m rubbing the fur the wrong way, tell the cats to turn around.”

Jesus didn’t avoid the argument. He thought it more important to address things directly.

A third way Jesus managed to lose friends and win enemies (and similar to the others) is that he didn’t buy into the Carnegie principle of not criticizing, condemning, or complaining; neither did Jesus subscribe to the suggestion that one shouldn’t say to another, “You’re wrong.” More important to Jesus than avoiding criticism or not pointing out the error of others, was cutting through and exposing the truth.

Jesus referred to two stories from the Old Testament. He told the story of Elijah saving a foreign widow from starvation. And he reminded them that, though there were many lepers in Israel in the day of Elisha, it was a foreign soldier that Elisha healed. In telling these two stories, Jesus was pointing out to the Nazarenes that God’s goodness and grace—the message of deliverance for the poor and the oppressed and healing for the sick and the day of liberation—the message wasn’t limited to the people of Israel. In telling these stories, Jesus was uncovering the provincialism of the people, their self-centered religious tendencies.

You see, it is easy for people to assume that God is theirs, and not the other way around. It is easy for us to assume that God has a preference for us, and not for others. And there will always be someone we can think of, that we would find offensive if we were told that God favors them, as well. There is an offensiveness to God’s grace, in that it is always larger than any of us want it to be. We’re grateful that God’s grace is big enough for us, but do we want it to be big enough for people we despise?

Flannery O’Connor tells about offensive grace in her short story titled, *Revelation*.⁶ The central character is Mrs. Turpin, and she is sitting in a doctor’s office waiting room with her husband. Mrs. Turpin passes time by classifying each person in the waiting room according to her ranking system. She looks at people whom she classifies as white trash, village idiots, pathetic lunatics, or “normal” people like her and her husband, Claude. In her mind, Mrs. Turpin thanks God that she is not a “white-trash, a [Negro], or ugly.” She engaged in conversation with some of the other people in the waiting room. Aloud, she thanked God for her own sweet disposition, pitying people with bad dispositions. At one point she deplored people who were ungrateful, and she crowed about her grateful heart. “If it’s one thing I am, it’s grateful... Oh, thank you, Jesus; Jesus, thank you!”

At that point, Mary Grace, an awkward pimply-faced college student who had been reading a book had had all the self-righteousness she could bear from Mrs. Turpin. Mary Grace threw her book at Mrs. Turpin, striking her above the eye. Then she climbed across the coffee table and started strangling Mrs. Turpin’s neck, yelling, “Go back where you came from, you old wart hog.”

Dazed from the experience, Mrs. Turpin and her husband left the doctor’s office. At the end of the day, Mrs. Turpin was looking out across her farm, and she had a vision. She saw hordes of people going through a field of fire toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of Negroes in robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at

⁶ The story, “Revelation”, is found in its entirety in *Flannery O’Connor: Spiritual Writings*, Robert Elsberg, ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003.

once as those who, like herself and her husband, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right.

It seems there's room for more people in the kingdom of Heaven than most of us are prepared to admit.

The more I think about it, the more I think Jesus had the right approach. Not that we really want to make enemies and lose friends, but we do need to take the approach that goes most directly to the truth. We don't need to let false assumptions go unchallenged. We don't need to be afraid of speaking the truth in love. We don't need to compromise in our proclamation of the gospel.

What is the gospel, according to you? The truth is, there are many who won't want to hear about the radical nature of the salvation Jesus offers to the world. In fact, there are many who don't think Jesus' salvation should even be offered to the whole world. If the gospel we proclaim doesn't challenge the status quo, if the gospel we proclaim doesn't force us to consider the salvation of people we despise, if the gospel we proclaim doesn't expand your vision of the kingdom, then maybe it isn't really the gospel at all.

What is the gospel, according to you?