



Influence

Featuring Ben Peterson

Olympic gold medalist

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “influence” is defined as: “the power to change or affect someone or something.”

Our society often looks at the concept of influence as a privilege usually afforded to people who are famous, talented, wealthy, and popular. It’s true. Some people have bigger platforms than others based on those factors and therefore have a greater level of influence.

But long before he was an Olympic champion, Ben Peterson decided that he would reject the notion that influence is limited to the elite. While in high school, he and his brother John joined the wrestling and football teams and decided they would honor the Lord through their sports. As they became more confident in their faith in Christ, they started sharing the Gospel of Christ with their friends.

At that point, they were just small-town prep athletes from northwest Wisconsin, yet they were already proving that influence has little to do with being well-known, and everything to do with reaching out to those around you. Eventually, the Peterson brothers went to college and developed into elite international wrestlers.

“Before we went to the Olympics, we discussed how we were going to use the platform to share our faith,” Peterson says. “There was a definite desire on our part to be vocal although we were shy in many respects. God gave us simple opportunities to share the Gospel. That prepared us for the time when we would be thrust into a more visible realm.”

Peterson won a gold medal at the 1972 Olympics and a silver medal at the 1976 Olympics. He later coached at Maranatha Bible College for 28 years and continues to run a nationally recognized wrestling camp. Ben Peterson has had some young athletes tell him that they wouldn’t be able to serve God until they have won, but he responds with his personal story.

“Long before John and I ever thought we’d be in the Olympics, we were seeking to be faithful and consistent with our Bible readings and through our fellowship with other Christians,” Peterson says. “Whenever the opportunity came to tell people about Christ, we did that very simply. That’s what young athletes need to do. When you have opportunities to tell other people about Him, just be faithful and give Him honor.”

When Jesus recruited his team—the men we often refer to as the Disciples—he didn’t look for the most famous, popular, wealthy people around town. Instead, Jesus approached a diverse group of men who represented various socio-economic backgrounds. Some were gifted as

writers and physicians, but others were simple fishermen. None of them were particularly notable. Yet, Jesus told them the same thing He tells us today:

“You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” (Matthew 5:14-16/NLT)

Winning championships and gold medals can certainly afford a platform that will reach large audiences, but just as Ben Peterson discovered, the opportunity to share the love of God with others is not dependent on material success or public acclaim. Don’t wait for some award or accolade that may or may not happen. You have the power to influence someone around you right now.

Discussion Questions

1. Who are some people that you would consider to have great influence? What are some factors that determine whether or not someone has influence and to what degree?
2. Do you see yourself as someone who has influence? If not, what do you think needs to happen in your life before you can have influence?
3. Considering what you know about the Disciples, why do you think Jesus chose mostly unremarkable men to change the world?
4. Go back and read Matthew 5:14-16. What do you think Jesus meant when He said, “You are the light of the world?”
5. What are some ways that you can use your influence on teammates, classmates, coaches, family, etc., for the sake of the gospel?

Closing Prayer