

Life Together...



CALLED INTO
THE COMMUNITY
OF FAITH

Encouraging One Another

I Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:13, 10:25

I want to begin this morning with a reference to *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan's wonderful allegory of the Christian life. Bunyan understood and portrayed the Christian life - from the initial conviction of sin to entrance into heaven itself - as a **journey**. This journey was along what Bunyan variously called the "Good Road" (Hazelbaker, *The Pilgrim's Progress in Modern English*, p.26), the "Narrow Road" (p. 32), the "Narrow Way" (p. 51), and the "Path" (p. 51). My personal favorite is that one spoken by Christian as he faced Apollyon. "Beware of what you do, Apollyon ... for I am in the King's Highway, the Way of Holiness. Therefore, take heed to yourself" (p. 80). And because the journey is fraught with danger, Bunyan portrayed the idea of **companionship** in it as a great blessing. The sweetness of this fellowship in the Way is reflected in the dialogue between Christian, Faithful, and their dear friend Evangelist:

Faithful happened to look back and see an individual coming up behind them. Faithful recognized him and said, "Oh, look who's coming yonder, Brother!" Then Christian looked and exclaimed, "It's my good friend Evangelist!" "Yes," said Faithful, "and my good friend, too. He's the one who set me in the pathway to the Gate." By that time Evangelist had caught up with them and greeted them, saying, "Peace be with you, dearly Beloved, and peace be to your helpers."

“Welcome, welcome, good Evangelist,” said Christian. “The sight of your face brings to my remembrance your kindness in times past and your unwearied labor for my eternal welfare.” “And welcome a thousand times over,” said Faithful. “Dear Evangelist, your companionship is so desirable to us poor Pilgrims” (pp. 111-112)!

This delightful view of companionship in the way is expressed in the Old Testament in **Ecclesiastes 4:9-12** (ESV), ⁹ *Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.* ¹⁰ *For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!* ¹¹ *Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?* ¹² *And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him- a threefold cord is not quickly broken* (ESV). Listen to the same passage from the New Living Translation: ⁹ *Two people can accomplish more than twice as much as one; they get a better return for their labor.* ¹⁰ *If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But people who are alone when they fall are in real trouble.* ¹¹ *And on a cold night, two under the same blanket can gain warmth from each other. But how can one be warm alone?* ¹² *A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.*

From personal experience we know the blessings of companionship. One summer in high school the group with whom I had hiked part of the Appalachian Trail the year before tent camped for a week in Cades Cove in the Smokey Mountains. An 11-mile long road loops around the perimeter of the Cove. About halfway around is a parking lot at the head of the 2 ½ mile trail to Abrams Falls. One day we hiked to the Falls and while swimming there one of the boys slipped and gashed his ankle on a sharp rock so deeply that he couldn't

walk on it. We carried him all the way back, 2 ½ miles, to the trailhead. Sometimes one guy would carry him on his back. Sometimes two of us would form a seat with arms interlocked and carry him.

This story, Ecclesiastes 4, and *Pilgrim's Progress* all introduce us to the big idea for this sermon: As Christians, we have a mutual obligation to help one another along in the way of obedience. Indeed, when Christian stumbled into the Swamp of Despondence, he was aided by a man named Help. "Then," said Help, "give me your hand." So, [Help] offered his hand and pulled [Christian] out, set him on solid ground, and encouraged him to continue on his way" (p. 12). This help we call encouragement. Personally, I consider Biblical encouragement to be one of the greatest needs in the church today. Also, in my estimation, the church that possesses a true corporate mentality is the church in which the members are actively and deliberately encouraging one another in the way of obedience. The Scripture is replete with injunctions to this mutual obligation. **I Thessalonians 5:11**, *Therefore encourage one another*. **Hebrews 3:13**, *But encourage one another day after day*. **Hebrews 10:25**, *encouraging one another, and all the more, as you see the day drawing near*.

The English word "encourage" has three basic meanings: (1) to cheer (gladden) or to inspire with courage or hope, (2) to stimulate or spur on, (3) to give help or aid. This is pretty consistent with what we see in the Bible.

In the New Testament we see the saints comforting one another. **I Thessalonians 5:14**, *encourage the fainthearted*. The Greek word translated "encourage" (*PARAMUTHEOMAI*) means to speak soothingly or to console. This word is used twice in John's account of the death of Lazarus. **John 11:19**,

*and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to **console** them concerning their brother (see also 11:31). But it is the word for “fainthearted” that is so interesting. Literally the Greek word means “small-souled.” It is a rare word describing someone who is disheartened. So we are called to comfort, to cheer the brokenhearted and the dispirited among us.*

Various forms of the Greek word *STERIZO* (see also *EPISTERIZO*) are usually translated “strengthen.” In the New Testament we see the saints propping up or supporting one another in regard to their faith. **I Thessalonians 3:2**, *and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to **strengthen** and encourage you **as to your faith**. Acts 15:41, and [Paul] was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, **strengthening** the churches. Acts 18:23, and having spent some time [in Antioch], [Paul] departed and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, **strengthening** the disciples.* It ought to be our goal to do all within our power to see to it that each one is established firmly in the faith - that each one is assured of his or her salvation; that each one is resting entirely upon the merits of Christ; that each one is utterly convinced of the truth of the gospel.

In the New Testament we see the saints spurring one another on in living a distinctly Christian life. **Hebrews 10:24**, *and let us consider how to **stimulate** one another to love and good deeds.* The Greek word (*PAROXUSMOS*) means to stimulate or to excite to activity or growth. Whenever Julia plants a shrub she will mix in some liquid seaweed to stimulate the growth of the root system. We are called to a similar purpose – to stimulate one another in doing what is proper for Christians.

In the New Testament we see the saints refreshing one another. **Romans 15:32**, *so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find **refreshing rest in your company***. To **Philemon** Paul wrote, *For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because **the hearts of the saints have been refreshed** through you, brother (7)*. And *Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; **refresh my heart** in Christ (20)*. **I Corinthians 16:17-18**, *And I rejoice over the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus ... For they have **refreshed my spirit** and yours.* **II Corinthians 7:13**, *For this reason we have been comforted. And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because **his spirit has been refreshed** by you all.* **II Timothy 1:16a**, *The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus for he often **refreshed** me.* We've heard it said, "I just want to be a blessing." Why couldn't we make it our aim to be ones who refresh the saints; ones who do not add burdens but who help lift them from others; ones who do not create unrest but ones who give rest to the souls of others; ones whose attitudes, presence, and deeds cause the hearts of others to rejoice.

In the New Testament we see the saints urging one another forward in ministry initiatives. **Acts 18:27**, *and when [Apollos] wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren **encouraged** (PROTREPO) him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he helped greatly those who had believed through grace.*

In the New Testament we also see the saints exhorting one another (**I Thess. 4:10**), appealing to one another (**I Tim. 5:1**), and urging one another to godly conduct (**Acts 14:21-22**). We could go on but I think you get the point. Encouragement takes many shapes. And I think you can see that Biblical encouragement is more than lending a sympathetic ear, more than telling that struggling brother that everything will be OK or to hang in there, more than the

verbalizing of trite sentiments. Biblical encouragement is a deliberate, rich, gutsy thing. If wishing someone well is angel food cake, Biblical encouragement is a 24 ounce steak.

Now, if such is our mutual obligation why do we find it so difficult to offer genuine encouragement? I want to suggest five basic reasons. First, we are no better encouragers because of the shallowness of our relationships. Sure, we have friendships but precious few that grow out of a common love for the gospel. Second, we are no better encouragers because we are uncomfortable talking about spiritual things. Engagement in “The Great Conversation” as C. S. Lewis called it, is as awkward for many believers as trying out a pair of ice skates. Talking about a theological issue, a passage of Scripture, or Christian ministry ought to be as natural and easy as talking sports, or computers, or gardening. Third, we are no better encouragers because of our own self-centeredness. These days many of you feel trapped; shackled by schedules, stuff, problems, and obligations – unable to extricate yourselves; unable to simplify your lives in order to gain the freedom to serve others. And you know all too well that such is a wretched existence. Fourth, we are no better encouragers on account of the spiritual leanness of our own souls. For the most part we are not given to those classic spiritual disciplines that have nourished and sustained the souls of generations of believers – the reading and study of God’s Word, prayer and fasting, simplicity and solitude, journaling, and theological reflection. Last Thursday morning I walked into Atlanta Bread for a sourdough roll and a cup of coffee. I walked up to the counter and was surprised to find the shelves and counters, normally brimming with fresh breads and pastries, completely bare. There was nothing. The baker had not come in to work the night before. Our own spiritual shelves are often barren; holding nothing sweet, nothing

wholesome, nothing nourishing to offer the struggling saint in front of us. Fifth, we too often come into the assembly of saints totally unprepared. Up late on Saturday night. Prayerless and hurried on Sunday morning. Simply not ready for the God-ordained opportunity - the weekly gathering of the saints – opened up to us to help someone else advance in the King’s Highway; to speak words of kindness and affirmation to a fellow traveler.

Now, why do we need encouragement? Here’s the bottom line as I see it. Because the way is hard and the journey is long. **Acts 14:21-22**, *And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “**Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.**”* And aggravating the difficulty is our own ignorance of God’s will, the weakness of our faith (**Lu. 17:5**), our susceptibility to weariness, and our tendency to wander from the way of grace (**Gal. 1:6-7a, 3:1-3**). Beloved, we need the help, the encouragement of others to hold out in the way of obedience.

To what end do we encourage one another? For the purposes of this sermon I want to zero in on the single overarching reason. Listen to **Acts 14:21-22** once again, *and after [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them **to continue in the faith**. **I Thessalonians 3:2**, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you **as to your faith**. **Colossians 2:5-7**, for even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability (STEREOMA) **of your faith in Christ**.⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,⁷ having been firmly rooted and now*

being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. The common thread is faith. In the faith. Your faith. “Saving faith may be defined as a certain conviction, wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, as to the truth of the gospel, and a hearty reliance (trust) on the promises of God in Christ” (L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 503). So the goal of mutual encouragement is that we all come to the end of our days still in the faith; that we all continue day by day in hearty reliance upon the promises of God in Christ; that we all live lives consistent with our calling as Christians.

Of what are we to remind one another? First, most importantly, preeminently, beyond all else we are to remind one another day by day of the main thing. In the hymn *It Is Well with My Soul*, Spafford called it “this glorious thought.” “Our sin not in part but the whole is nailed to the cross and we bear it no more.” In Paul’s first letter to Timothy he wrote, *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen (1:17)*. It was consideration of the main thing, the “glorious thought,” that launched the apostle into this benediction of praise. *It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. ¹⁶ And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life (1:15-16)*.

Again, hear Bunyan. In trying to dissuade Christian from continuing in the path of righteousness into which he had been directed by Evangelist, Mr. Worldly Wiseman says, “There’s no more dangerous and troublesome way in the world than the one to which he’s directed you. And that’s what you’ll find if you allow yourself to be guided by his counsel. You have, as I perceive, already met with

some trouble, for I see the dirt of the Swamp of Despondence on you. That swamp is only the beginning of the sorrows that follow after individuals traveling on that path ... In the way you're going, you're likely to meet with Wearisomeness, Painfulness, Hunger, Perils, Nakedness, Sword, Lions, Dragons, Darkness, and – in a word – Death” (p. 18). Now, listen to Christian’s response. “Why, Sir, ... this burden (the weight of the guilt of his sin) ... this burden upon my back is more terrible to me than all these things you’ve mentioned. No, I don’t think I care what I meet with in the way as long as I can also find deliverance from my burden” (p. 19). First, most importantly, preeminently, beyond all else we are to remind one another day by day of the main thing.

Second, we are to remind one another that life is short and heaven is near. **James 4:14**, *yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.* **Hebrews 10:25b**, *encourage one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.* It is this constant exhortation from our brothers that will move us in the direction of obedience to **Galatians 6:10**, *so then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.* It is this constant exhortation from our brothers and sisters that will help us keep temporal endeavors and material goods in proper perspective. **I Timothy 6:9-10**, *But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.*

Third, we are to urge one another to continuance in ministry to the saints. **II Corinthians 4:1**, *Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not*

lose heart (see 4:16). **Galatians 6:9**, and let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary.

Fourth, we are to remind one another that we are not alone in our struggles. **I Peter 5:9**, But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.

Fifth, we are to urge one another to keep plodding; to continue in the Way even though progress is torturously slow. Remember the words of William Carey, "I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything." Beloved, God has called us to finish, not to be flashy.

Sixth, we must constantly keep the real goal before one another. The goal is to hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end (**Heb. 3: 6, 14**). Beloved, don't get confused. The real goal is to come to the end of the way still in the faith, still in love with the Lord of the Way, still looking to the reward, still resting on the work of the Savior, still preferring the way of holiness to the way of sin. I, like Paul, want to finish the course (**II Tim. 4:7**). All I desire at the end is to here these words, "Well done, good and faithful servant ... Enter into the joy of your Master" (**Matt. 25:21**).

Seventh, we are to speak truth to one another regarding our sin; to encourage one another to proceed rightly. **Hebrews 3:13**, But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Ninth, we are to remind one another of the value of a good conscience. I **Timothy 1:19**, *keeping faith and a **good conscience**, which some have rejected, and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.*

Tenth, we are to remind one another of God's tender mercies. We are prone to ingratitude. We desperately need others to point out to us the multitude of divine favors that are ours every day.

Of course, we are to extend every common courtesy to the end that others might be encouraged - to point out their gifts, strengths, and contribution to the body; to thank them; to express appreciation for them; to meet their physical needs; to render assistance when they need a little help from their friends.

Life Together...



CALLED INTO
THE COMMUNITY
OF FAITH

Encouraging One Another

The Big Idea: As Christians, we have a mutual obligation to _____ one another along in the way of obedience ... This help we call _____.

In the New Testament we see the saints ...

_____ one another (**I Thess. 5:14**).

propping up or _____ one another in regard to their faith (**I Thess. 3:2; Acts 15:41, 18:23**).

_____ one another on in living a distinctly Christian life (**Heb. 10:24**).

_____ one another (**Rom. 15:32; Philemon 7, 20; I Cor. 16:17-18, II Cor. 7:13; II Tim. 1:16a**).

urging one another _____ in ministry initiatives (**Acts 18:27**).

exhorting one another (**I Thess. 4:10**), appealing to one another (**I Tim. 5:1**), and urging one another to godly conduct (**Acts 14:21-22**).

Why do we find it so difficult to offer genuine encouragement?

Five basic reasons:

We are no better encouragers because ...

of the _____ of our relationships

we are _____ talking about spiritual things

of our own _____ - _____

of the spiritual _____ of our own souls

we too often come into the assembly of saints totally

Why do we need encouragement?

Because the way is _____ and the journey is _____ (**Acts 14:22**).

To what end do we encourage one another?

See **Acts 14:21-22; I Thess. 3:2; Col. 2:5-7**.

The goal of mutual encouragement is ...

that we all come to the _____ of our days still in the faith;

that we all continue day by day in hearty _____ upon the
promises of God in Christ;

that we all live lives _____ with our calling as
Christians.

Of what are we to remind one another?

We are to remind one another day by day of the _____.

We are to remind one another that life is _____ and heaven is _____
(**Jam. 4:14; Heb. 10:25b; Gal. 6:10; I Tim. 6:9-10**).

We are to urge one another to continuance in _____ to the saints
(**II Cor. 4:1; Gal. 6:9**).

We are to remind one another that we are not _____ in our struggles (**I Pet. 5:9**).

We are to urge one another to keep _____.

We must constantly keep the _____ before one another (**Heb. 3: 6, 14**).

We are to speak truth to one another regarding our _____; to encourage
one another to proceed _____ (**Heb. 3:13**).

We are to remind one another of the value of a good _____ (**I Tim. 1:19**).

We are to remind one another of God's _____.

We are to extend every common courtesy
to the end that others might be encouraged.