

Encouragement

How to See and Celebrate
Evidences of Grace

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THE SHAPING VIRTUES SERIES



Encouragement: How to See and Celebrate Evidences of Grace

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*To C. J. Mahaney—
a denominational founder and faithful pastor,
whose life and teaching have taught me
the transforming effect of a divine perspective.*

*Thank you, C. J., for encouraging so many of us,
and for leading the way in seeing grace.*

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Encouragement

Introduction

What does the church need to give greater attention to in our day? If you ask a large number of Christians, few would talk about the urgency of creating a culture of encouragement. This message is not in high demand.

After all, society and its institutions are decaying. Morality is declining and hostility is rising. In the church of Christ, there is theological and ethical compromise. Christian leaders have been tossed by the waves and thrown by cultural winds. Denominations are drifting from the truth.

We are in a spiritual war zone, with the din of yelling, explosions, and loss all around us. I understand questioning whether this is the best time for someone to step up to the microphone to talk about why we need to give more attention to spreading joy by seeing grace.

Is this really the time for encouragement?

A Time for Encouragement

Certainly encouragement is not the only thing needed. We also need reproof, warning, and awakening, and Scripture is given to this end. But this *is* a time for encouragement, and I would like to see more Christians with a passion for this biblical priority. Here's why:

First, encouragement is always timely. This is because our God is the God of encouragement (Rom. 15:5) who has given us everything in his Word for our encouragement (Rom. 15:4) and commands us to encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11). The gospel we proclaim is a message of profound encouragement—the good news that God has “loved us and gave us eternal comfort [encouragement] and good hope through grace” (2 Thess. 2:16).

Even in the darkest days, God is concerned that his people live in the comfort of the gospel. This is why the prophet Isaiah not only brought correction, but was commanded by God to comfort the people of God (Isa. 40:1).

Second, there are many who are discouraged, anxious, and fearful. Satan is the father of discouragement, daily scheming to discourage the people of God. But God thwarts the enemy's plans and guards our hearts with the encouragement that is in Christ (Phil. 2:1).

We all need to be strengthened in God's grace and comforted by his love. My goal is not just to talk about encouragement, but to encourage brothers and sisters in the truth. I would not enjoy writing a book on encouragement that does nothing to alleviate the discouragements of God's people.

Third, encouragement is on the decline. Our world has become increasingly judgmental and cynical. People are quick

to shun and ostracize others for their failures. Social media foments outrage, negativity, and harshness, and specializes in selectively presenting and amplifying the worst about others.

The church is not immune to these tendencies. Many Christians are now suspicious of institutions and authority. It has become popular to assume pastors are bullies and narcissists, and to criticize churches and denominations as compromised and failing. Some people have even built platforms based on publicly criticizing the church.

I am grateful that the Christians I know and labor with in ministry are committed to encouragement. I serve a tremendously encouraging congregation, I work with an encouraging pastoral team, and we're joined to an encouraging denomination. Still, Christians with a passion for this grace are an increasingly rare breed.

Fourth, there is an urgent need for greater peace, love, and unity among Christians. In recent years, there has been a growing division and disunity, not only in the world but among Christians. In some cases, it involves believers with strikingly similar doctrinal commitments. We have become more contentious, more suspicious, and more factious, which has also involved becoming less charitable and less large-hearted. We have a problem.

One of the best ways to promote the unity Christ desires for his people is to cultivate the skill of seeing and celebrating grace.

Fifth, in Sovereign Grace Churches we have a rich heritage of pursuing encouragement that we desire to preserve into the future. C. J. Mahaney has taught us the importance of identifying evidences of grace, which means "actively looking

for ways that God is at work in the lives of other people.”¹ Encouragement is one of our 7 Shaping Virtues.² Our churches have been built upon this biblical practice, and our shared desire is to continue in what we have learned, preserving a passion for encouragement in the second and third generations of our churches.

Mark Prater, the Executive Director of Sovereign Grace and my good friend and fellow elder at Covenant Fellowship Church, recently shared with all the pastors in our denomination his desire for our churches to give increased attention to the pursuit of encouragement. I hope this book contributes to that need.

Sixth, misunderstandings of true encouragement abound. Encouragement is not a matter of words only, but involves more fundamentally our perspective and our hearts. Encouragement is not a matter of personality or mere niceness. True encouragement is not flattery, because it is not exaggerated, dishonest, or spoken for personal gain.

Being an encourager doesn’t mean we never criticize or that we have happy feelings about everyone. We do not need more sappy Christians who affirm everything, reprove no one, and lack boldness. A biblical approach to encouragement maintains an important place for discerning error, correcting others,

1. C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2005), 98.

2. Sovereign Grace has identified seven Shaping Virtues as fruits of the gospel and qualities we desire to prioritize and pursue in our churches: humility, joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood, and godliness. The list is not intended to be exhaustive. See www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shaping-virtues.

even speaking tough words. Blindness to the weaknesses, errors, and sins of others is naivety, not virtue.

Biblical encouragement is not man-centered, aimed at boosting self-esteem and self-confidence, but God-centered, aimed at his glory. When we encourage others, we are reflecting God's character, obeying God's command, and celebrating God's activity.

Seventh, encouragement matters for Christian witness. We live in a crooked and twisted generation, a world of complaining, fault-finding, outrage, and slander. Followers of Christ have an opportunity to shine like stars though a life of encouragement.

Encouraging fellow believers in the church displays a love that lets the world know the truth about Jesus (John 13:35; John 17:23). Encouraging unbelievers and discovering things to approve in them builds bridges for the gospel. The encourager not only looks for signs of saving grace in fellow believers, but signs of common grace and the image of God in unbelievers.

For all these reasons, the topic of encouragement has become a happy fire burning in my bones, and I am eager to do all I can to promote this quality in the lives of Christians and churches everywhere—especially in the churches of Sovereign Grace, which I love and often pray for.

An Encouraging Command

1 Thessalonians 5:11 says, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." This is an encouraging command.

Christians have the greatest resources for encouragement in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The immediately preceding verses supply the content of encouragement: “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (1 Thess. 5:9–10). Jesus died to bear the wrath we deserve, that we might live with him forever. The cross is a fountain of encouragement for sufferers and sinners.

Also, the repeated “one another” means God has placed brothers and sisters in our lives for the purpose of mutual upbuilding and edification. He intends to use us to strengthen others, especially to strengthen fellow members in our local church. And he has brought people into our lives for our encouragement.

Lastly, the phrase “just as you are doing” is a reminder of the ways we are already encouraging one another and building one another up. Many Christians don’t need a complete course-correction in encouragement, but need to be spurred on in continued faithfulness. A life of encouragement will not be motivated by guilt but by grace.

Encouragement has rightly been called adrenaline for the soul, oxygen in the life of the church, an oasis in the desert of life, cool rain after a long dry spell, and the key to refreshing relationships. By the grace of God, we all have a part to play in creating and maintaining a culture of mutual encouragement in our relationships, our churches, and our homes. May this short book be used to that end.

Father in Heaven, we praise you as the God of encouragement. Thank you for giving your Son for our salvation and for lavishing the riches of your grace upon us. Equip us now with everything good that we may do your will, and work in us that which is pleasing in your sight. Teach us to encourage others abundantly, as you have encouraged us abundantly in Christ. Make our churches abound in encouragement for generations to come. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Encouragement

Becoming Barnabas

The bonds of unity and love in the Jerusalem church were strong. Acts 4 says that those who believed the gospel were “of one heart and soul . . . and great grace was upon them all” (v. 32–33). One man in particular is mentioned for his personal example in modeling this culture of grace—a Jewish man named Joseph.

Joseph is one of my favorite people in the Bible. No one else in Scripture so clearly embodies the Shaping Virtues of Sovereign Grace Churches in so small an amount of space.

When he is first introduced, Joseph is selling his field and giving the money to the apostles to support the mission of the church (Acts 4:36–37). He so excelled in consistently commending, refreshing, and strengthening other believers that he gained a reputation for it, and was given a nickname

by the apostles. They called him Barnabas, which means son of encouragement. That was the defining feature of how he related to other believers.

The Anti-Barnabas

My friends gave me a nickname when I was in my early 20s. It wasn't Son of Encouragement. They called me The Hawk because I consistently pointed out people's faults and sins. I associated leadership with identifying weaknesses and I thought discernment meant finding faults. The result was a pronounced passion for the ministry of correction.

It all started when I was a kid. Growing up, we had a weekly family night, often involving a game and a generous portion of ice cream. When the kids experienced a lot of conflict, my parents asked us each week how we are getting along with our siblings. I developed the habit of creating a written list of the petty offenses my brother and sister committed against me. And I came ready to contribute: "On Monday, Ryan refused to share his bike with me. On Tuesday, Sarah yelled 'Stop it!' at me in an irritated tone of voice."

Later in life, at college, I visited various churches with friends, and I led the way in spending Sunday afternoons critiquing the Sunday service, especially the song lyrics and the sermon. I was like the Anton Ego of Sunday services. (Anton Ego is the food critic in the Pixar movie *Ratatouille*, known for his ruthless judgments and scathing reviews. They call him "The Grim Eater." He's not mostly there to eat; he's there to judge.) To my shame, no one could tear apart a gathering of God's people like me.

Left to myself, I am naturally the anti-Barnabas, the son of criticism. This tendency is still with me.

Love is the Soil

Over time, I discovered a better way to live. Where did I begin learning the value of encouragement? In God's word, yes. But the lesson came from God through pastors in Sovereign Grace Churches. I was still in college when C. J. Mahaney preached a sermon on encouragement from 1 Corinthians 1. He said,

We are all natural-born experts at critique. But I want to become an expert at discerning evidences of grace. If Paul can find grace in the Corinthian church, surely we can find grace in our churches. That's the transforming effect of a divine perspective. By seeing and celebrating grace, we not only emulate Paul's example; we emulate the example of God himself.³

C. J. later warned,

The common temptation and tendency that one never outgrows or moves beyond is the temptation and tendency to be preoccupied with areas of weakness and deficiency in the church. Our evaluation of our churches must be informed by a divine perspective of the church.⁴

That was revolutionary for me. Early in 2002, several friends and pastors graciously shared with me their concern about my

3. C. J. Mahaney, *Continue in What You Have Learned: Sermons from C.J. Mahaney that Shaped a Family of Churches* (Sovereign Grace Churches, 2022), 22.

4. *Ibid.*, 122.

proud and critical spirit. They were right. In March of 2002, my dad, Ken Mellinger—who was also my pastor—gave me a book by Jonathan Edwards called *Charity and Its Fruits*. He suggested we read and discuss it together. This is just one of many ways my dad’s investment in me has been life-changing.

That book continues to challenge me to this day. Charity is another word for love. Edwards explains that love is the sum of all virtue and the essence of the Christian spirit. “A real and true love will incline us to high thoughts of others, and to think them better than ourselves.”⁵ Such love is humble and kind. It is the opposite of what Edwards calls a censorious or fault-finding spirit.

A censorious spirit appears in a forwardness to judge evil of the qualities of others. It appears in a disposition to overlook their good qualities, or to make very little of them, . . . when a charitable disposition would discern many good things in them, to balance or more than balance the evil.⁶

That year I learned that love is the soil in which a life of encouragement grows. To put it negatively: The call to encouragement is not simply a call to say nice things to others. In fact, a focus on words without a focus on our perspective of others and our hearts toward others makes us superficial encouragers. Here is a crucial biblical insight for growing in encouragement:

5. Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits: Christian Love as Manifested in the Heart and Life* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), 8.

6. *Ibid.*, 207.

*True encouragement requires
eyes that see grace in others,
a heart that responds with gladness, and
words that promote continued faithfulness.*

Seeing, Celebrating, and Speaking

We see this in Barnabas. Acts 11 describes a church that had recently been formed in the Gentile city of Antioch, as Christians scattered from Jerusalem because of persecution. The church in Jerusalem received word that a great number of Gentiles had now received the good news of Christ in Antioch. So they sent Barnabas to check on this fledgling work.

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. (Acts 11:23–24)

Barnabas had eyes that see grace, a heart that responded with gladness, and he spoke words that strengthened others and encouraged ongoing faithfulness. David Peterson writes, “His ability to discern the grace of God at work in others gave him a generous and encouraging spirit.”⁷ The gospel had worked its way deeply into his soul, and this shaped his life and relationships.

After Saul the persecutor became a Christian, the believers in Jerusalem were afraid of him and doubted his conversion. Barnabas was the one who stepped forward to support Paul

7. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 355.

and advocate for him (Acts 9:27). Later on, when there was sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas regarding John Mark, it is no surprise that Barnabas was in favor of endorsing Mark and wanted to give him another chance (Acts 15:36–41). It appears that Barnabas succeeded in getting Mark back in the mission, since Paul, near the end of his life, requests Mark to come, and describes him as “very useful to me for ministry” (2 Tim. 4:11). Mark also went on to write the gospel of Mark.

Barnabas lived a life of encouragement. He was the kind of person I want to be—skilled at discerning the grace of God at work in others, and marked by a generous spirit that pleases the Lord.

Barnabas is commended as “a good man” so that we would learn from his example. He models for us all what it means to be a people of encouragement. Each one of us has the privilege and responsibility of cultivating this kind of culture. The grace of God has come to us in Christ so that we would be a source of refreshment to others, through the ministry of encouragement.

Eyes That See Grace

The first step involves our perspective. Like Barnabas, who came and “saw the grace of God,” we need eyes that see grace in others. We know that the new Christians in Antioch were not perfect. They were in need of further instruction, and Barnabas recruited Paul to meet with the church and teach them for an entire year (Acts 11:26).

It would have been easy to be primarily aware of the ways their understanding was deficient, and of the many doctrinal and ethical areas where instruction was needed. It would have

been easy to be primarily aware of sin. Barnabas could have compared the Antioch church unfavorably with his previous experience in the church in Jerusalem. But instead, Barnabas saw the grace of God in the church.

What is grace? Grace is God's undeserved kindness to those who deserve his eternal judgment. We have received the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our salvation. "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8). "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Gal. 2:21). Christ, in the unfathomable riches of his grace, died in our place and rose from the dead to bring us life and peace.

This grace now overflows in the lives of God's people. The English Puritans in the 16th and 17th centuries talked a lot about evidences of grace—grace that is visible in our lives. This is a thoroughly biblical concept, which is the only way Barnabas could see the grace of God in Antioch. Grace forgives sin and gives us righteous standing before God, but it doesn't stop there. The grace of God creates in us a heart that loves Christ. Grace sanctifies us, sustains us in suffering, produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, and empowers our service.

The Bible teaches that there are evidences of God's grace in the lives of God's people. In 2 Thessalonians 1:11–12, Paul says all of our good works are "according to the grace of God" and evidence of "his power." Paul describes the joyful, sacrificial generosity of the Macedonian churches as "the grace of God" that has been given to them (2 Cor. 8:1–4). Titus 2:11–12 declares that "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people," and that this grace is now "training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live

self-controlled, upright, and godly lives.” Renouncing sin and practicing godliness are evidences of grace. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 and the gifts of the Spirit are all gifts of God’s grace. In 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul explains all of his labors in ministry as evidences of “the grace of God that is with me.”

The author of Hebrews invites us to draw near to the throne of grace, to find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16). Certainly part of this grace is all that God does to “equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever” (Heb. 13:21).

The life of the Christian, therefore, is full of visible grace. And God’s desire for his people is that we search out and rejoice in evidences of his gracious activity in others.

This doesn’t mean we’re supposed to ignore weaknesses and sin. There is an important place in the Christian life and in pastoral leadership for observing weaknesses and addressing areas that need growth. However, the accent must fall on observing the grace of God. We need to resist the natural tendency we all have to view other believers fundamentally through the lens of their weakness, sin, and error. Our passion should not be criticizing, but commending.

Over time in relationships, affirmations tend to diminish and irritations tend to increase. Strengths are taken for granted, and weak points become the focal point of our relating to others. That is what we must resist, whether it is in the church, in our marriages, or in ministry.

J. C. Ryle says, “There is no surer mark of backsliding and falling off in grace than an increased disposition to find fault,

pick holes, and see weak points in others. . . . Let us be more quick to see grace, and more slow to see imperfections!”⁸ Yes, let us be more quick to see grace. Let us be more skilled at seeing the activity of God in other Christians and other churches.

A Heart That Responds With Gladness

This is the second step: When Barnabas came and saw the grace of God in others, he was glad. He rejoiced. He was elated. In a culture of encouragement, people are marked by genuine gladness in others. They not only have eyes that see grace, they also have a heart that responds with joy.

We cannot encourage others as God intends without our hearts being involved—specifically, without rejoicing. 1 Corinthians 13:6 says that love “rejoices with the truth.” Truth in that verse is not talking about doctrinal truths, like reading a systematic theology book and feeling happy about it. You can do that without loving anyone. “Love rejoices with the truth” is the antithesis of rejoicing in wrongdoing. It means love rejoices in what is beautiful and true in people’s lives.

I used to think it is a mark of maturity to find our joy in God alone, not in people. I thought it was a mark of maturity to not have my joy dependent upon going to the Sunday service or experiencing fellowship in community. But I’ve realized that God has made us in such a way that he intends a large part of our happiness in life to be found in other people.

8. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: It’s Nature, Hindrance, Difficulties, and Roots* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1979), 87, 201.

I find it remarkable that in the beginning, while Adam was enjoying perfect fellowship with God in the garden, God looked at the arrangement and said it was not good—“It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Well, Adam’s not entirely alone; he does have *God himself*. But what is “not good” is that Adam had the joy of God’s presence without the joy of God’s people. Therefore God places us in relationships, in community—especially, in the redeemed family of God—that we would experience the joy of seeing his activity in others.

In Psalm 16:3 David says, “As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones in whom is all my delight.” The Bible teaches that we should experience the greatest heights of joy in seeing God’s grace at work in fellow believers: “I have no greater joy that to hear that my children [members of God’s family] are walking in the truth” (3 John 4). If we truly rejoice the gospel, we will also rejoice in the fruits of the gospel in the lives of those Christ has redeemed.

Reflect on your own life in this area: What is your response to the grace of God at work in those around you? Do you have an emotional response to evidences of grace? When you see grace, how does your heart respond? At the heart of encouragement are eyes that see grace and a heart that responds with gladness.

Words That Encourage Others

From a place of seeing grace and being glad, we should look for opportunities to speak words that promote continued faithfulness. Barnabas did this when he exhorted, or encouraged, all the Christians in Antioch to “remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.”

It's not hard to imagine Barnabas, the son of encouragement, interacting with these believers in Antioch: *"It is amazing to see with my own eyes what God has done here in Antioch! The gospel of Jesus Christ has come to you in power, and I can't wait to tell the church in Jerusalem about the grace of God in you. Friends, you are proof that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."*

I am sure he encouraged them at length: *"And this gospel is bearing remarkable fruit in your lives! Your faith in Christ is genuine, your love for God and each other is obvious, and by the power of the Holy Spirit you abound in hope. Keep it up! You're doing well. Stay faithful to the Lord, and be confident that God is at work. I know his grace will continue to build you up."*

I imagine they understood why Barnabas was given his name. It's not enough only to see God's activity and respond with joy—encouragement must be expressed.

By encouragement, I am referring broadly to strengthening others through commendation, affirmation, and other words that give grace. The goal of encouragement is to help people see what God has done, is doing, and will do—to show that God is active for them, in them, and through them.

Sometimes encouragement reminds people of the great truths of Scripture, directing hearts to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. Encouragement can also make people aware of God's activity in their lives. We can encourage others by letting them know why we thank God for them, or sharing how we pray for them, or telling them what we've learned from their example. Sometimes encouragement publicly honors others. Sometimes encouragement exhorts people to remain

faithful and not grow weary. Always, encouragement builds up those who hear.

The example of Barnabas has implications for the words we speak and the words we avoid. Sinclair Ferguson imagines what it would be like to spend an hour with Barnabas, and how different this would be from some conversations:

How sad to be part of a discussion in which the name of a Christian is mentioned and to hear his or her reputation stabbed in the back by the words of others! Most of us have all-too-painful contact with people who see their chief ministry as tearing fellow believers down to size. By contrast, at the end of an hour in the company of Barnabas, most of us would be able to leave feeling taller and more able to press on in serving the Lord.⁹

Words have remarkable power. We have the privilege of using words to build up and to refresh the weary. See grace. Be glad. Speak life.

Lessons from Barnabas

There are several important lessons about encouragement we can learn from Barnabas.

First, encouragement is an especially precious virtue. Many qualities are valued by God, and he could have given us in the early church people whose names reflect the importance of numerous qualities—a son of diligence, son of knowledge, son of discernment, or son of justice. But God calls special

9. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel-Centered Life* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2007), 185.

attention to this particular virtue, and commends Barnabas as a good man, so we would know that great grace produces great encouragers.

Second, we should encourage people so frequently that we gain a reputation for it. For Joseph to be given the name Barnabas shows that encouragement was the defining feature of his life. I'm sure it was not one isolated act that gave him this reputation, but a lifestyle of refreshing others and rejoicing in God's grace in their lives.

Third, focus your encouragement on the church. Barnabas saw grace not simply in isolated individuals, but in the church. The church is the only institution Christ has promised to build (Matt. 16:18), and "the focal point of God's plan to mature his people and save sinners."¹⁰ Every Christian should join a church and devote themselves to discerning and delighting in the grace of God in their church family.

Fourth, encouragement should not be aimed only at mature believers. None of the men and women in Antioch had been Christians for long. We are not told of remarkable accomplishments or decades of faithfulness. New Christians need encouragement, and ought to be encouraged for the smallest sparks of grace in their lives.

Fifth, encourage beyond your own church. It is sometimes easier to see grace in our own church than in other churches. It might have been easier for Barnabas to see grace in Jerusalem than in Antioch. But he is able to look at a different church and rejoice in what God is doing there. Christians

10. Sovereign Grace Churches *Statement of Faith* 12.2, "The Local Church."

today should do the same.

Sixth, as we have seen, encouragement is fundamentally a matter of our outlook and our hearts. Cultivate a heart that genuinely rejoices in the spiritual fruit and growth in others, and the right words of encouragement will follow. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34).

Seventh, encouragers are full of the Holy Spirit and faith. In Acts 11:24, it explains the cause of Barnabas’ skill when it says that he saw grace and was glad, “for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” That word “for” is explanatory. What made him such a relationally refreshing person? How did he come to excel in encouragement? Two explanations are given: Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit, and he was full of faith.

How to Excel in Encouragement

We can all grow in being sons and daughters of encouragement, and this is the way forward.

1. Be full of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God, sent from the Father and the Son, wages war on the flesh and creates the love and joy of Christ in our lives. The Holy Spirit is the one who first opened our eyes to see grace in Christ. And now the Spirit is at work continuing to help us see grace in others.

Every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but not every Christian is “full of the Holy Spirit.” Acts 6:3 talks about selecting men for service and looking for those Christians who are “full of the Holy Spirit”—the assumption being that not every

Christian is full of the Spirit.¹¹

Therefore, pray that God would fill you with his Spirit. Those who are full of the Spirit are more aware of the presence and activity of God in others. They are able to discern the faintest traces of the Spirit's work, and see God at work where others may see only sin and weakness. Being full of the Spirit results in increased joy and greater fruitfulness in life.

2. Be full of faith. We all need faith, because evidences of grace are often small—less like the sun and more like a smoldering wick (Matt. 12:20). And these evidences of grace always appear alongside evidences of corruption in our lives, which are often far easier for us to see.

The man or woman of faith looks past the surface and identifies God's activity in the life of a fellow sinner. When we are full of faith, it tends to make our relationships full of joy and hope. Ask God to increase your faith—to help you see others through the lens of the gospel.

Faith is aware of the character and promises of God, and therefore, faith is confident. Faith sees the miraculous change

11. Max Turner makes this point when he writes, "Luke does not believe all Christians to be 'full of the Spirit': this metaphor is used precisely to distinguish those whose lives are particularly marked by the work of the Spirit from ordinary Christians (cf. Acts 6:3). And in Lukan terms the criterion for judging whether it is appropriate to speak of someone as 'full of the Spirit' is . . . whether the community of Christians felt the impact of the Spirit through that person's life and saw the Spirit's graces and gifts regularly expressed through him or her." *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 169.

that God has done in the lives of others by regenerating them, and faith knows that if that change occurred, any change is possible. It's not only possible, it's promised. Faith remembers that in a little while, all the people of God will be glorified.

Therefore faith refuses to be discouraged by sin. Faith enables us to relate to others with an awareness that God has been at work in them, is currently at work in them, and will continue his good work until Christ comes again (Phil. 1:6).

Encouragement does not come naturally to us. But whatever our track record, whatever our personality, whatever relational damage a lack of love has produced in our lives, by the grace of God we can grow in commending God's activity in others.

God is calling us to be sons and daughters of encouragement. More than this, God himself is at work in us, making us channels of refreshment and grace to others. Lean in, and prepare to be changed.

The God Who Praises People

No one has more delight in the people of God than God himself. No one is quicker to see and celebrate the smallest evidences of grace in our lives. No one is more encouraging, gracious, generous, and rewarding. The holy and righteous judge of all, who knows all things—including everything about us—affirms, admires, praises, commends, and honors his people.

Our Father in heaven wants us to go through life with a sense of his personal encouragement toward us and his pleasure in us, his children. When a child does something well, or even attempts to do something well but comes up short, what does a good father do? He encourages his child. Kevin DeYoung writes,

Why do we imagine God to be so unmoved by our heartfelt attempts at obedience? He is, after all, our heavenly

Father. What sort of father looks at his daughter's home-made birthday card and complains that the color scheme is all wrong? What kind of mother says to her son, after he gladly cleaned the garage but put the paint cans on the wrong shelf, 'This is worthless in my sight'? What sort of parent rolls his eyes when his child falls off the bike on the first try? There is no righteousness that makes us right with God except for the righteousness of Christ. But for those who have been made right with God by grace alone through faith alone and therefore have been adopted into God's family, many of our righteous deeds are not only *not* filthy in God's eyes, they are exceedingly sweet, precious, and pleasing to him.¹²

A good father finds pleasure in his children. He enjoys them. He is quick to encourage and commend them. He sees and celebrates what is good. This is our Father in heaven: he is the God who praises people. And we grow in encouragement, not first and foremost through practical tips and creative ideas, but by knowing the character of God as the God of all encouragement.

God creates a commending people by revealing his gracious heart and divine perspective, which transforms our hearts and teaches us to see people from his vantage point, as they truly are.

12. Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 70.

The God of Encouragement

When I say that God praises people, I do not mean he worships them but that he commends and affirms them. What is affirmation? Sam Crabtree writes, “Affirmation is truthfully declaring by complimentary word or action the goodness of something. Good affirmation attests, certifies, or confirms that which honors God, that which is morally upright.”¹³

The day is coming when many will hear the “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21) that God speaks over ordinary, faithful Christians. 1 Corinthians 4:5 says that when the Lord returns, he will “bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.” On that day, amazingly, “Then each one will receive his commendation from God.” That is, each will receive his *praise* from God.¹⁴

God’s commendation is not confined to the future. In Romans 2:29, Paul says the true Christian is the one who receives praise not from man but from God. Proverbs 31:30 says, “A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” Here God is both commanding us to praise others, and expressing his affirmation of all who fear him. John Piper is correct when he says, “[We tend to think] that it would be unfitting for God himself to commend his people, to praise his people . . . But

13. Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation: God-Centered Praise of Those Who Are Not God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 132.

14. “Commendation” in 1 Corinthians 4:5 is *epainos* in the original. It’s the word used for praise three times in Ephesians 1—“to the *praise* of his glorious grace,” (v. 6), and “to the *praise* of glory,” (vv. 12 and 14).

that would be a profoundly unbiblical thing to say.”¹⁵

Too often we assume God is hard to please, slow to enjoy us, disappointed by our best efforts, and postured to critique rather than postured to encourage and bless. But this perspective is contrary to God’s revelation of himself as the God of encouragement, the one who is exceedingly gracious and overflowing with love. “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made” (Ps. 145:8–9).

God has demonstrated a love for sinners that surpasses knowledge. He sent his Son to become a curse for us (Gal. 3:13) and to secure our adoption (Gal. 4:5). God is our loving Father who is eternally for us; Christ is our high priest who reigns on a throne of grace and lives to intercede for us; and the Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance. God delights in those he has redeemed: “He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (Zeph. 3:17).

This is the heart of God for his people, and it is the foundation of his encouragement and ours.

Commended Through Their Faith

It is no surprise, in light of the gracious character of God and his joy in the display of his glory, that God consistently praises people throughout salvation history. The Lord said to Noah, “I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation”

15. John Piper, “Will God Really Praise Us?,” www.desiring-god.org/interviews/will-god-really-praise-us

(Gen. 7:1). He commends Job, saying, “There is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8). James 5:11 says, “You have heard of the steadfastness of Job.” We also heard of the wavering of Job, but God graciously commends what is good.

In fact, God commends people whom most of us would not be comfortable commending, and might even consider it unwise to commend. Hebrews 11 surveys the lives of Old Testament saints from the perspective of faith, emphasizing the lives of men and women who pleased God. By faith “the people of old received their commendation” (Heb. 11:2). God is testifying from his divine witness stand that these men and women were pleasing to him. The language of commendation is repeated in verse 4, where God commended Abel, and again in verse 5, where Enoch “was commended as having pleased God.”

Hebrews 11 closes with a summary statement that all these saints were “commended through their faith” (Heb. 11:39), making God’s affirmation of these individuals a summarizing theme of the chapter.

What is striking about the chapter is, first, that the author seems to intentionally pick some seriously flawed people to commend—liars, cowards, prostitutes, murderers, and adulterers are among them—and second, that it is not the sins and failures that are remembered at all, but their faith in God.

In the Old Testament, God provides an honest portrait of their sins: Abraham was selfish and deceptive in implying Sarah was not his wife (Gen. 12:10–20, 20:1–13); Sarah faltered in faith and laughed in disbelief (Gen. 18:9–15); Gideon was ruled by fear and did not want to lead (Judg. 6:11–40); Barak

would only fight if joined by Deborah (Judg. 4:6–8); Samson was a man of lust and violence (Judg. 14–16); Jephthah was a fool and a bad father (Judg. 11:29–40); David committed adultery and murder (2 Sam. 11–18).

But in Hebrews 11, God declares that these are “[men] of whom the world is not worthy” (v. 38). God’s perspective is that the world does not deserve to breathe the same air and walk the same ground as these great ones.

This would not be my natural assessment and summary of these men and women. Certainly, the world today would cancel and judge these people. But they have the praise of heaven, the joyful commendation of God over their lives.

Lessons From Hebrews 11

What can we learn from the high praise that God gives in Hebrews 11?

First, it reveals the character of God. The point is not that sin doesn’t matter, but that God delights to commend his people. The writer of Hebrews is intentionally highlighting the graciousness of God as one who takes pleasure in the smallest acts of faith and actively searches out what is good. He sees the grace we often fail to see, and he overlooks the sin we often fixate upon.

Second, that God praises these flawed saints encourages us in the midst of our own weakness and sin. Hebrews is written to a people with “drooping hands and . . . weak knees” (Heb. 12:12–13), who stand in need of strengthening and encouragement. John Calvin observes,

There was none of them whose faith did not falter. . . . In every saint there is always to be found something reprehensible. Nevertheless although faith may be imperfect and incomplete it does not cease to be approved by God. There is no reason, therefore, why the fault from which we labor should break us or discourage us provided we go on by faith in the race of our calling.¹⁶

Third, this divine commendation should inform the way we view and treat others. God's desire is that we see grace in others, cover a multitude of sins, and learn what we can even from imperfect examples. He wants us to follow his example of discerning grace in hard places. We do not reserve encouragement for those with perfect faith; we encourage persevering faith wherever it appears.

The Promised Encourager

The prophet Isaiah spoke of a chosen servant who would come to suffer for God's people. This servant's ministry is the ministry of encouragement: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench" (Isa. 42:3). This is a description of the gracious ministry of Christ toward his own. However weak and discouraged we may be, Christ will deal tenderly with us and preserve our faith in him. Isaiah says, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary" (Isa. 50:4).

16. John Calvin, *Hebrews and 1 and 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), 182.

Christ is the “Wonderful Counselor” we need (Isa. 9:6). He is the consolation and encouragement of Israel (Luke 2:25), a herald of good news, liberty, and favor (Luke 4:18–19). He is the high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb 4:15). When the promised encourager arrived, he declared to weary sinners, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28–29).

Consider the life of Christ. See how often he is encouraging men and women. He commends Nathanael as one in whom there is no deceit (John 1:47). He marveled at a Roman officer, and commended his great faith to the crowd that followed him (Luke 7:9). He celebrated the faith of a Canaanite woman, saying, “O woman, great is your faith!” (Matt. 15:28). He publicly praised the poor widow who gave two small copper coins, saying she put in more than all the others (Luke 21:1–4). When a woman anointed him with expensive ointment at Bethany, and others were full of criticism, he said “She has done a beautiful thing to me” (Mark 14:6), and announced that what she has done will be told throughout the world wherever the gospel is preached (Mark 14:9).

It is true that Jesus sometimes used speech that was critical and severe. His rebukes were stern and his warnings alarming. He called his generation “evil and adulterous” (Matt. 16:4). He told the Pharisees they were whitewashed tombs (Matt. 23:27) and sons of the devil (John 8:44). His calls to discipleship were radical—“Follow me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:22)—and he boldly warned of the dangers of hell (Matt. 13:49–50; Matt. 25:41, 46). Yet all of

this was done in love, and makes his tender encouragements all the more beautiful.

Jesus is perfect in knowledge and piercing in holiness, yet he commends sinners like you and me. This is staggering. If I knew all that is in a person's heart, I would not affirm as Jesus does. But his ways are not our ways. He truly is the King of Grace, the Wonderful Counselor, the encourager of bruised reeds.

Let Not Your Hearts Be Troubled

Jesus tells people how valuable they are—"Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt. 10:31). He often encourages people in the grace of God. "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37).

He encourages Martha when she grieves the death of her brother Lazarus: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). No one who has walked the earth ever spoke more encouraging words than these.

Jesus is tender with his disciples in their folly and sin. At the Last Supper, while Jesus was anticipating his death and telling his disciples that his blood would be shed and his body broken for them, the disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest. Jesus not only gently instructs them, but encourages them in response: "You are those who have

stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom” (Luke 22:28–29).

Jesus then specifically tells Peter that though Satan will sift Peter like wheat, Jesus has prayed for him, that his faith would not completely fail (v. 31–32). He then says to Peter, “And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (v. 32). When Peter denied Jesus three times in Jesus’ darkest hour, Jesus came to him in grace and spoke life-giving words that recommissioned him for ministry: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17).

John 14–17 is one of my favorite sections in all of Scripture. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus spoke many encouraging words to his disciples: “Let not your hearts be troubled” (John 14:1); “I will not leave you as orphans” (John 14:18); “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27). These and many other encouragements were shared that sacred evening.

Among his promises was the gift of the Spirit. “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever” (John 14:16). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of comfort, help, encouragement, and strength. The Spirit of God brings divine encouragement home to our hearts. A community filled with the Spirit will be a community of encouragement, because the Spirit opens eyes to see the grace of God and the truth of his Word.

He Knows Your Works

The ministry of encouragement that marked Jesus’ life on earth continues today. In Revelation 1–3, the crucified, risen, and ascended Savior is walking among the lamp stands, which are

the churches. Jesus says to the church in Ephesus, and to other churches in Revelation 2–3, “I know your works.” The works he has in view in Ephesus are their good works, including their toil, their patient endurance, their discernment, and their opposition to evil. “I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary” (Rev. 2:3).

Jesus commends the church. Commendation is not all he does—he also lovingly reproves where change and repentance is needed. But if there is grace in the church, Christ will see it and bring it to the attention of his people, that we might be encouraged.

It may be that when we look at ourselves, or when we look at others, we see no evidences of grace and no spiritual beauty. Too often, we are more aware of weakness and sin in ourselves and in others than we are aware of the grace of God.

J. C. Ryle gives this reminder, commenting on Jesus’ statement that he knows our works:

You see no beauty in any action that you do. All seems imperfect, blemished, and defiled. You are often sick at heart of your own shortcomings. But now know, that Jesus can see some beauty in everything that you do from a conscientious desire to please him. His eye can discern excellence in the least thing which is a fruit of his own Spirit. He can pick out the grains of gold from amid the dross of your performances, and sift the wheat from amid the chaff in all your doings. Your endeavors to do good to others, however feeble, are written in his book of remembrance. He does not forget your work and labor or love,

however little the world may regard it.¹⁷

Our faith, love, and hope are often weak, but Christ rejoices in these graces in our lives, delighting in what he sees of his activity in our lives. It is not difficult for Jesus to discover his grace in his people. God looks upon the Christian whose growth is slow, whose faith is faltering, whose obedience is imperfect, and he celebrates the smallest evidence of his grace in our lives.

The Puritan Christopher Love writes,

Weak Christians look more on their sins than on their graces; yet God looks on their graces and overlooks their sins and infirmities. . . . God reckons His people not by what is bad in them, but by what is good in them. . . . O it is good serving such a master, who is ready to reward the good we do, and is ready to forgive and pass by what is amiss. Therefore, you who have but little grace, yet remember that God will have His eye on that little grace.¹⁸

The Pleasure of God

The God who rejoices in his works (Ps. 104:31) rejoices in every evidence of his grace in the world. Because he is good, he delights in the display of his goodness wherever it appears. Because he is gracious, he focuses more on our graces than our sin. And because he is just, nothing praiseworthy will be overlooked.

17. Ryle, *Holiness*, 228.

18. Christopher Love, sermon on 2 Timothy 2 (preached at St. Lawrence Jewry, London, April 20, 1651), quoted in Don Kistler, *Why Read the Puritans Today?* (Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999).

Hebrews 6:10 says, “For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.” God would cease to be just if he failed to commend the work of his people in Christ. This is serious encouragement. When a Christian is working hard, or when a Christian is walking in love, or when a Christian perseveres in serving his or her local church, God sees and God rejoices.

John Piper says,

God delights in, is pleased by, what we are becoming in the power of the Holy Spirit. I know this is hard to believe and hard to feel for many people, because our experience is that, if there’s any part of our lives that is imperfect, that’s what others are going to pick up on and complain about. They’re not going to spot anything good and like us for it. They’re going to spot what we haven’t yet accomplished for goodness, and they’re going to be displeased by it—and that’s especially true of God, people feel. We can never really be liked, only tolerated, because the focus is always on our shortcomings rather than our little successes. I want to say loud and clear, *God is not like that*. Let me say it again, *God is not like that*. God sees the incremental advances of our transformation by his Spirit and delights in them.¹⁹

19. John Piper, “I Know God Loves Me, but Does He Like Me?,” www.desiringgod.org/interviews/i-know-god-loves-me-but-does-he-like-me

God is not merely tolerating you, he is rejoicing over you. Yes, he is displeased when we pursue sin, but sin is not the dominant reality in the lives of God's people.

For the Christian, every day is filled with moments of divine pleasure from the God of encouragement: God is pleased when we hope in his steadfast love (Ps. 147:11), pleased with a faith that believes he exists and believes he rewards those who seek him (Heb. 11:6), pleased when we bear fruit and increase our knowledge of him (Col. 1:10).

Every time we do good and share with others, such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Heb. 13:16). When the Christian resists being conformed to the world (Rom. 12:1–2), or prays for others and leads a peaceful and godly life (1 Tim. 2:2–3), or gives generously (Phil. 4:18), or cares for those in their home and supports family members (1 Tim. 5:4), Scripture explicitly says these things are pleasing in the sight of God.

Be Like Your Heavenly Father

The God of encouragement is constantly noticing grace, and he wants us to follow his example. The Puritan Thomas Brooks writes,

It is sad to consider that saints should have many eyes to behold one another's infirmities, and not one eye to see each other's graces, that they should use spectacles to behold one another's weaknesses, rather than looking-glasses to behold one another's graces. . . . Tell me, saints, does not God look more upon his people's graces than upon their weaknesses? Surely he does. He looks more at David's and Asaph's uprightness than upon their

infirmities, though they were great and many. He eyes more Job's patience than his passion. . . . Ah! saints, that you would make it the top of your glory in this, to be like your heavenly Father! By doing so, much sin would be prevented, the designs of wicked men frustrated, Satan outwitted, many wounds healed, many sad hearts cheered, and God more abundantly honored.²⁰

Be like your heavenly Father! How can we grow in being like him? The gospel gives us God's perspective of others.

Every Christian was once a child of wrath but is now the recipient of divine mercy and love (Eph. 2:3–4). Therefore, we no longer regard anyone according to the flesh, but see them as new creations (2 Cor. 5:16–17). We know that God began a good work in them and will bring it to completion when Christ returns (Phil. 1:6). Christ shed his blood, giving himself for sinners, “to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14).

This means, as John Piper says, “Every glimmer of good in the life of God's children is blood-bought. Jesus died to make it possible. What does that say about us if he died to bring it about, and we don't consider it worth praising?”²¹

Remember that the grace in your own life is precious to Christ. And when you look at others, look more on their graces than on their sins. Celebrate the smallest evidences of grace. Strive to see Christians everywhere as God does, allowing his perspective to control your outlook, attitude,

20. Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* (Feather Trail Press, 2010), 147.

21. Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation*, 8.

and speech toward others.

Every glimmer of good in every Christian is bought with the blood of Christ. It's worth praising.

The Ministry of Encouragement

One of my personal treasures is a four-page handwritten letter from Alan Redrup. Alan was one of the founding pastors of the church I serve—Covenant Fellowship Church, planted near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1984. A few years ago Alan went to be with the Lord.

He gave me the letter on September 23, 2008, when I was 28 years old. A few weeks later, I would be ordained as a pastor and step into a new ministry assignment.

Dear Jared,

It's been on my heart to commit some of my thoughts about you and Covenant Fellowship Church to pen and paper and send to you. I pray that these words will serve to encourage you. As you step into the role of Senior Pastor . . .

Alan wrote about God's deep care for those God had brought together in our church family.

Perhaps because so many were like the 'burnt stones' that Nehemiah was able to place back in the wall—so many who had difficult and painful experiences with churches in the past, that God seemed to put his protection around us and provide for his own. . . . Our history is a history of God's kindness being shown to us again and again.

He described the specific evidences of grace he observed in my life (it would be awkward to reproduce those here), and expressed his confidence that God would do good things through me. He exhorted me to allow my gift of faith to “bring strength and encouragement” to the weak and the strong.

Alan exhorted me to guard against self-sufficiency and pride, and to never forget the simple truth of John 15:5, where Jesus says, “Apart from me you can do nothing.”

*Purpose in your heart to always and ever abide in Christ
and let the fruit of that union be tasted by many.
I will be praying for you,
Alan Redrup*

I was facing a daunting assignment, and God in his kindness used the timely words of a friend to strengthen me.

Our Need for Encouragement

The human condition is such that we all need encouragement. It is good to remember that people are often carrying greater burdens than we know, experiencing hidden discouragements and sorrows.

Many Christians are familiar with anxiety and depression. There are days when our souls are bereft of peace, we forget what happiness is, and our endurance perishes (Lam. 3:17–18). Even the most godly men and women can find their souls cast down and in turmoil (Ps. 43:5). At times our responsibilities and the many demands of life seem to crush us. In our bodies we know pain and suffering, sickness and fatigue, aches and allergies.

Often our discouragements are relational. We have been mistreated, someone we love is not doing well, or we do not have the close friendships we desire.

In a world like ours, with an enemy like ours, there are countless sources of discouragement. At times we don't even know the reason the darkness is there, and why it will not lift. The battle is real. We all need encouragement.

John Bunyan's famous allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, teaches us that every Christian needs someone named Help to pull him from the Slough of Despond. We need Interpreter to help us see the goodness of Christ to us when we don't perceive it. We need all the saints at the Palace Beautiful, who spoke of the glories of Christ, the valiant acts of his people, and the sure promises of God, all for the encouragement of pilgrims.

And when it comes time to pass through the final river of death, and the darkness threatens to overwhelm us, we need Hopeful by our side, telling us what is true—"Be of good cheer, my Brother. I feel the bottom, and it is good." Hopeful is the friend who will hold our head above water so we can see the gate of glory, and so we can hear our Savior telling us that he is with us as we pass through those waters, and so we can see the heavenly host preparing to rejoice at our reception.

Examples in Scripture

When God told Moses that Joshua would succeed him and lead the Israelites into the Promise Land, God commanded Moses to go to Joshua and “encourage him” (Deut. 1:38). The Lord’s desire was for the soul of Joshua to be strengthened for the work. Joshua needed to remember the promise of God and the presence of God. No encouragement is greater than the truth that God is with us.

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall put them in possession of it. It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.’ (Deut. 31:7–8)

Who would Joshua have been without the encouragement of Moses? We are often fearful and dismayed, but God uses encouragement to make us strong and courageous.

Ruth lost her husband, her home, and her standing in society. She must have experienced such strength and comfort when Boaz encouraged her, saying, “The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord” (Ruth 2:12).

When David was running from Saul as a hunted man, fearing for his life, Jonathan went to David in his time of trouble and “strengthened his hand in God” (1 Sam. 23:16). How did he do this? First by being present. Second, by saying to David, “Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you” (23:17). Third, by affirming his love and commitment

to David in the form of a covenant (23:18). Jonathan's faith in God and affection for David positioned him to offer the encouragement David needed.

Nathan, after confronting David, also encouraged him in the truth. David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan spoke words of great comfort: "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Sam. 12:13).

It is good, when we are opposed by enemies and our strength is failing, to have a Nehemiah say to us, "Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your [family]" (Neh. 4:14).

The Apostle Paul in his suffering and old age says that Onesiphorus "often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains" (2 Tim. 1:16).

Similar examples could be listed. If David, Paul, and all the great men and women of Scripture needed encouragement and refreshment, we do as well.

On a Mission to Encourage

It is striking that the goal of Paul's apostolic mission in the New Testament is frequently summarized in terms of encouragement. Paul and Barnabas returned to many churches, "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith" (Acts 14:21–22). "And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed" (Acts 16:40). Acts 20:1–2 says, "After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed to Macedonia. When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece."

The aim of Paul's ministry was the encouragement of the churches. He desired to visit them "that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Rom. 1:11–12). When Paul couldn't visit churches, he reminded them that the goal of all his labors was "that their hearts may be encouraged" (Col. 2:1–2), and he sent coworkers "for this very purpose, . . . that he may encourage your hearts" (Eph. 6:22; Col. 4:8).

Paul's letters are filled with encouragement. Above all Paul reminds Christians of who Christ is and what he has done for us. And Paul repeatedly helps Christians see evidences of God's grace at work in their lives, communicating the joy he has because of this. "We heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven" (Col. 1:4–5). The word of God is "at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13). "Your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you" (Rom. 16:19).

When Paul was present with the churches, he says "we . . . encouraged you" (1 Thess. 2:12), and commands the same of them: "Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:18). Paul also writes, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing" (1 Thess. 5:11). Every church is called to be a community of encouragement, marked by the ministry of discerning and delighting in the grace of God.

A Community of Encouragement

New Testament scholar Murray Harris says, "Encouragement is one of the most important ministries in the church of the

New Testament.”²² Christians who catch this biblical vision and priority will be zealous to encourage, eager to bring strength and refreshment to others.

Some people take a hesitant approach to encouragement. They think it is a fundamentally dangerous endeavor that is prone to devolve into flattery or idolatry. It is considered risky because it might create pride in others.

That is certainly a possibility to guard against. However, I do not think the Bible promotes a cautious approach to encouragement. Rather, we are commanded to eagerly play our part in creating a community of encouragement. I resonate with Ray Ortlund’s observation when he said, “I have never met anyone suffering from too much encouragement.”²³

How can our churches excel in the ministry of encouragement?

Mine the Scriptures for encouragement. All of Scripture aims at our encouragement and our hope. Romans 15:4 says “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

The word of the Lord revives the soul, rejoices the heart, and enlightens the eyes (Ps. 19:7–8). It is a treasure trove of encouragement. The Holy Spirit uses Scripture to direct our

22. Quoted in Ray Ortlund, “The Surprising Ministry of Encouragement,” Dec. 8 2020. www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-surprising-ministry-of-encouragement. People can and do suffer from too little reproof, and from flattery, but that is different from the idea of suffering from too much biblically defined, God-honoring encouragement.

23. Ibid.

hearts to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. Here we rejoice in his promises. Here God declares who he is, what he has done, and what he will do for us in Christ.

In the summer of 2016, our two-year-old daughter, Aggie, was diagnosed with cancer. The Lord brought us through that time and Aggie is now healthy. But in the hospital, as doctors were working to save Aggie's life, we were in need of encouragement. Our church was informed and many people prayed for us and cared for us. One way we experienced encouragement was through the solid truth of God's word.

Our friend, Bethany Sacks, wrote down Psalm 55:22 when she visited: "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved." Another friend, Jace Hudson, shared Psalm 121:1-2, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

As verses were texted or emailed to us, we wrote them down on notecards and taped them to the wall of our hospital room, along with the name of the friend who shared that verse. Each one strengthened and comforted us in the truth.

Focus on the encouragement that is in Christ. The whole world is searching for encouragement, but there is no lasting encouragement apart from Christ. He is the grand epicenter of encouragement.

Distinctly Christian encouragement is different than a compliment, because it aims at directing hearts to Christ and deepening confidence in him. Encouragement that commends and congratulates is good (and thoroughly biblical), but encouragement that points to Christ is better. This is because our greatest need when we are discouraged is not to feel better

about ourselves, but to rest more fully in Jesus.

The reality of human weakness and sin means that attempts to boost confidence and strength by reminders of our superior resources will ultimately fail. Our strength cannot rest on our abilities and skills, precisely because these are subject to change. The world and its message of self-help can only offer a pseudo-encouragement, because it always focuses on human ability. A biblical approach runs deeper, focusing on what God has done and will do in Christ.

The Puritan William Bridge writes, “When a man draws comfort only from something that he finds within himself; from grace that he finds within, and not from grace without; from Christ within, and not from Christ without; then his comfort will not hold.”²⁴

And so we are not just told to encourage each other, but to do so by speaking gospel words (1 Thess. 4:18) and by considering the encouragement that is in Christ (Phil. 2:1). There is some encouragement to be found in what God is doing in us and through us, but it is not as deep as the encouragement of what God has done for us. Our rejoicing comes ultimately not in knowing how we are being used by God, but in knowing that Christ shed his blood for us, that we are known and loved by God, and that our names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20).

Speak words of grace every day. Words are more powerful than we know. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits” (Prov. 18:21). Proverbs 12:25 says, “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a

24. William Bridge, *A Lifting Up For the Downcast* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 35.

good word makes him glad.” It was said of Job, “Behold, you have instructed many, and you have strengthened the weak hands. Your words have upheld him who was stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees” (Job 4:3–4). Words strengthen the weak. Words uphold those who are stumbling.

God commands us, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). Every day, we have the opportunity to speak words of grace that build up those God has placed in our lives.

C. J. Mahaney writes,

Truly edifying words are words that reveal the character and the promises and the activity of God. They’re cross-centered words. They’re words rooted in and derived from Scripture, words that identify the active presence of God, and words that communicate evidences of grace that you observe in others.²⁵

C. J. continues, “We’re commanded to communicate only words like these that are good for building up another.”²⁶ At times it may be gentle correction or exhortation that is needed to give grace. But our words should always be good for building up.

One specific way words can encourage others is through the spiritual gift of prophecy. I call attention to this gift not to elevate one gift above others, but because prophecy is specifically said to be pursued and practiced for the encouragement

25. Mahaney, *Humility*, 114.

26. *Ibid.*, 114.

of the church: “The one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor. 14:3).

In the New Testament, prophecy does not come with the authority of Scripture, nor is it primarily predictive of the future. Prophesying simply means sharing an impression that God has brought to mind for the encouragement of others, and it is always to be tested by the final authority of Scripture. In Acts 15:32, “Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.” This spiritual gift is an important part of speaking words of grace in the life of the church.

Embrace suffering as an opportunity to encourage. God has encouraged us in our troubles so that we can be an encouragement to others in their troubles. This is part of his good purpose in our suffering. Through the stormy weather of trials, God is positioning us to experience the comforting shelter of Christ’s encouragement, and preparing us to be channels of his encouragement to others. Paul writes,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in all our troubles, so that we may be able to encourage those experiencing any trouble with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also does the encouragement we receive through Christ overflow. If we are distressed, it is for your encouragement and salvation; if we are encouraged, it is for your encouragement that you experience in your patient endurance

of the same sufferings that we also suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you will share in our encouragement. (2 Cor. 1:3–7)²⁷

The trials of others provide an opportunity for us to encourage them. The idle need admonishment, the weak need practical help, but the fainthearted need encouragement (1 Thess. 5:14).

Our own trials also provide an opportunity to encourage others. When Paul was imprisoned and other Christians were seeking to harm him, he could have sent the church a lengthy lament. He wouldn't have been wrong to do so. But instead, he writes his most joyful letter—the book of Philippians. He refuses to allow them to be discouraged about his situation. And he specifically wants them to know that God is using his imprisonment to advance the gospel in ways it would not be advancing otherwise (Phil. 1:12–14).

He not only speaks of his present circumstances in a way that encourages, he speaks of his future circumstances as a win-win situation that brings him joy, whether he lives or dies (Phil. 1:18b–26). When we talk about our suffering, we have an opportunity to strengthen others in the Lord, and to help them see a difficult situation with eyes of faith.

A Legacy of Encouragement

Alan Redrup passed into his eternal reward on Thursday, March 30, 2023. On April 8, a memorial service was held at Covenant Fellowship Church. Alan wrote a letter before he

27. William D. Mounce, *Interlinear for the Rest of Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013).

died, and requested that it be read at this service. It was a thank you letter, read by fellow pastor Andy Farmer.

It is no surprise that the letter was full of gratitude and encouragement. Alan thanked God for saving him. He encouraged his wife Linda and his entire family, including their children and grandchildren. He honored fellow-founding pastor Bill Patton, describing him as “the example that has helped me through some of my most difficult times,” and a number of other friends, highlighting the grace of God in their lives.

Alan expressed his love for the church, his confidence in God’s grace in our future, and his gratitude for the privilege of serving such remarkable people. And he closed by reminding us that we will meet again, when we are reunited in the presence of our Lord and Savior.

I was affected by that service in several ways. But perhaps more than anything else, I want to follow Alan’s example of encouragement. Rather than complaining and criticizing, I want to see grace through my old age (should I live that long) and until my dying day.

Alan’s legacy was a life of encouragement. I pray that many Christians—myself included—follow in his footsteps.

Encouragement

Ten Enemies

Jerry Bridges was born in Tyler, Texas, in 1929. His parents were poor. From birth he had a number of physical defects, including being cross-eyed, deafness in his right ear, and deformities in his spine. He knew hardships throughout his life. In 1988, Jerry's wife died of cancer three weeks after their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. He also experienced marginalization and isolation from the ministry he had given 30 years of his life.

The most fruitful ministry years for Jerry Bridges began when he was 65 years old, and would last until he was 80. In his memoir, *God Took Me by the Hand*, Bridges says that one of the highlights of that season was teaching each year at the Sovereign Grace Pastors College. It was during those years that I had the privilege of being one of his students.

Bridges wrote many books in the later years of his life. “God planned for me to be a Christian writer and teacher,” he wrote, “but why did he wait until I was sixty-five to bring this to full development? I believe the reason is that he wanted me to write and teach truths that have to be learned through lots of difficult experiences and lots of mistakes.”²⁸

Insights from a Seasoned Saint

Just a couple years before Bridges turned eighty, he wrote a book called *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate*. What was Jerry Bridges concerned about as he surveyed the evangelical world?

The motivation for this book stems from a growing conviction that evangelicals may have become so preoccupied with some of the major sins of society around us that we have lost sight of the need to deal with our own more refined or subtle sins.²⁹

His concern was that “On the whole, we appear to be more concerned about the sins of society than we are the sins of the saints.”³⁰

Bridges addresses a number of vices that are among the enemies of encouragement: pride, unthankfulness, selfishness, judgmentalism, and sins of the tongue. He shares his concern for the presence of doctrinal judgmentalism within the

28. Jerry Bridges, *God Took Me by the Hand: A Story of God’s Unusual Providence* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 132–133.

29. Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), 19.

30. *Ibid.*, 19.

theologically conservative evangelical community: “Because we do believe so strongly in the importance of sound doctrine, we can easily become hypercritical of those with whom we disagree.”³¹ He cautions against becoming like those with a critical spirit: “They look for and find fault with everyone and everything. Regardless of the topic of conversation—whether it’s a person, a church, an event, or anything—they end up speaking in a disparaging manner.”³²

Jerry Bridges went to be with the Lord in 2016. But we can continue to learn from his insight and experience, especially the burdens he had for the church in his later years.

In this chapter I want to consider various hindrances to a life of encouragement. Identifying these hindrances protects us from sin and helps us learn to see grace. We can be honest about our sin because we have so great a Savior. And we know that God gives grace to the humble.

The following list is not exhaustive, but provides ten enemies of encouragement we must vigilantly guard against.

1. Spiritual Pride

The greatest challenge to a life of encouragement is the pride in our own hearts. It requires humility to see grace in others. Philippians 2:3 says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” The Puritan Thomas Brooks writes,

Humility will make a man excellent at covering others’ infirmities, and at recording their gracious services, and

31. Ibid., 146.

32. Ibid., 146.

at delighting in their graces; it makes a man rejoice in every light which outshines his own, and every wind which blows others good.³³

Jonathan Edwards writes with great insight on the nature of pride. The Great Awakening of 1740 brought many spiritual blessings to the churches of New England. A few years later, that blessing continued. In 1742, Edwards wrote *Thoughts on the Revival*, both to defend the revival as a glorious work of God, and to express concern for the increased prevalence of “undiscerned spiritual pride,”³⁴ which he considered the greatest enemy of revival. “Alas, how much pride have the best of us in our hearts! . . . It is God’s most stubborn enemy!”³⁵

Edwards observed that pride had led to a spirit of judgment and suspicion that was undermining the humble spirit of grace and encouragement that had marked the earlier years of the revival. Edwards writes,

The spiritually proud person is apt to find fault with other saints, that they are low in grace . . . and being quick to discern and take notice of their deficiencies. But the eminently humble Christian has so much to do at home, and sees so much evil in his own heart, and is so concerned about it, that he is not apt to be very busy with other hearts; he complains most of himself, and complains of his own coldness and lowness in grace.

33. Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices*, 156.

34. Jonathan Edwards, *Thoughts on the Revival*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 398.

35. *Ibid.*, 399.

Pure Christian humility disposes a person to take notice of every thing that is good in others, and to make the best of it, and to diminish their failings; but to have his eye chiefly on those things that are bad in himself, and to take much notice of everything that aggravates them. In a contrariety to this, it has been the manner in some places, or at least the manner of some persons, to speak of almost every thing that they see amiss in others.³⁶

Resist spiritual pride, and cultivate that pure Christian humility that notices what is good.

2. A Lack of Love

1 Peter 3:8 commands all of us to “have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” Love creates a spirit of tenderness and sympathy toward others. “Love is patient and kind; . . . it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:4–7).

Love creates encouragers since “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). It has been said that faults are always thick where love is thin. Affection inclines us to see many good qualities, and to minimize the bad. Where love abounds, we respect and encourage others, and talk about them in ways that honor them.

Consider the people you esteem most highly in love, and the care you use to not speak negatively, carelessly, or disparagingly of them. This is the gracious disposition we ought

36. *Ibid.*, 400.

to cultivate not only toward friends and family, but toward everyone in our lives—especially brothers and sisters in the church.

3. *A Fault-Finding Spirit*

Jane Austen, in her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, has a description of the character named Mr. Darcy. She writes, “Mr. Darcy, who never looks at any woman but to see a blemish.” You can’t be an encourager if you are always seeing blemishes.

The word *ensorious* used to be a lot more popular. It means to be excessively critical of others—to have a negative, judgmental, and fault-finding spirit. Jesus is aware that his followers are not immune to this sin, and therefore commands us, “Judge not” (Matt. 7:1).

This command has been greatly misunderstood. It doesn’t mean we should not discern between good and evil, or that we should suspend our critical faculties, or that we should never point out sin and error. Rather, Jesus is prohibiting a condescending attitude, evaluating people harshly, an eagerness to find faults in others, judgments that are hasty or uncharitable, and words that tear down.

The Puritans talked about God’s command to practice “charitable judgments,” which Jonathan Edwards defined as “a disposition to think the best of others that the case will allow.”³⁷

One of the deadly fruits of a fault-finding spirit is suspicion. I have seen suspicion toward pastors and denominational leaders, and it is always a sad sight. Once suspicion is lodged

37. Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, 204.

in our hearts, we begin to see everywhere that which we suspect. Charles Spurgeon cautions,

Avoid with your whole soul that spirit of suspicion which sours some men's lives. . . . Suspicion makes a man a torment to himself and a spy toward others. Once begin to suspect, and causes for distrust will multiply around you, and your very suspiciousness will create the major part of them. . . .

It would be better to be deceived a hundred times than to live a life of suspicion. It is intolerable. . . . Nor is suspicion merely a source of disquietude, it is a moral evil, and injures the character of the man who harbors it. Suspicion in kings creates tyranny, in husbands jealousy, and in ministers bitterness. . . .

Learn to disbelieve those who have no faith in their brethren. Suspect those who would lead you to suspect others. A resolute unbelief in all the scandalmongers will do much to repress their mischievous energies.³⁸

4. Negative Media Intake

Our culture excels at being negative, and this works against a culture of encouragement. It is difficult to see the good in others when media is so frequently calling our attention to the bad. There are podcasts and talk radio shows that promote a critical spirit. The news highlights what is wrong. Social

38. Charles Spurgeon, "The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear" in *Lectures to My Students, Book II* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990), 168, 170, 172.

media stirs up outrage and criticism by spreading people's errors and sins.

Everywhere we turn people are seeking to call our attention to what is unlovely, unjust, impure, and ugly. Philippians 4:8 presents a better way: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

5. Gossip and Slander

Cultivating encouraging relationships requires care in our speech. James 4:11 says, "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers." We are commanded to "Put away . . . all slander" (1 Pet. 2:1) and "Speak evil of no one" (Titus 3:2).

The Apostle Paul was aware of how sins of speech undermine Christian community. "For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder" (2 Cor. 12:20).

Here is a countercultural word: We ought to make it our goal to not share things that undermine the good reputation of others. Tim Keller and David Powlison once wrote a useful article entitled, "Should You Pass on Bad Reports?" They conclude,

In summary, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, the principle is this. If you hear bad reports about other Christians you must *either cover it with love or go to*

*them personally before speaking of it to any others. . . . What you should never do is rush to judgment, or withdraw from loving another, or pass on the negative report to others.*³⁹

6. Hyper-Evaluation

Sometimes encouragement is inadvertently undermined from a good desire to grow and improve. If pastors and Christians are constantly and exclusively asking, “What can we do better?” there is the potential to create a culture of hyper-evaluation and critique.

Constructive criticism is good, but it grows like weeds and can easily take over, crowding out our awareness of grace. Evaluation is necessary, but our best efforts should be spent on sharing how God is working, and discussing the things that are encouraging. C. J. Mahaney wisely says, “Any evaluation of your church must begin with an awareness and appreciation of evidences of grace.”⁴⁰

7. Renegade Discernment

Discernment, courage, and conviction are needed in every age, and they are especially needed in these days. God calls us to “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (Rom. 12:9). Our passion for discernment can never be too strong. Error is subtle and deadly, and the church must be protected.

39. Tim Keller and David Powlison, “Should You Pass on Bad Reports?” www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/keller-and-powlison-should-you-pass-on/

40. Mahaney, *Continue in What You Have Learned*, 122.

However, when zeal for truth is disconnected from virtues such as charity, justice, graciousness, and humility, it undermines a culture of encouragement.

Tim Challies wrote a helpful book on the importance of biblical discernment called *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*. He observes that those with a passion for discernment must always guard against certain vulnerabilities, so that discernment does not go awry.

- We must not spend undue time and attention on criticism. “In discerning truth from error it is critical that we spend more time dwelling upon truth than upon error.”⁴¹
- Resist guilt by association. “In my experience the most prevalent danger of discernment is falling into the trap of guilt by association. . . . This is a fallacy because it is unfair and illogical to suppose that a relationship between two people, whether it is a friendship or merely a mention in a book or sermon, is a blanket endorsement of all a person writes or teaches.”⁴²
- Avoid treating all disagreements as doctrinal issues of greatest importance. “A discerning person will not allow matters of lesser importance to ascend to positions of utmost importance.”⁴³

41. Tim Challies, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 142.

42. Ibid., 144.

43. Ibid., 146.

- Don't go looking for error. "There is enough error in the world that we do not need to seek it out deliberately."⁴⁴
- Reject the idea that people can be neatly categorized in two camps: the good and safe on one hand, and the bad and unsafe on the other. "We then implicitly trust the people in the good camp and entirely reject anything said by those in the bad camp. To do so, though, is to ignore the common grace God gives whereby even those whose views are far different from our own can still be wise and can still speak the truth."⁴⁵
- Above all, Challies says, we must be on guard against truth without love.

Biblical discernment focuses more on truth than on error, more on grace than sin. The main way the gift of discernment ought to function in our lives is by equipping us to discern what is pleasing and excellent. We discern the healthy from the unhealthy for the purpose of rejoicing where God is at work and holding fast to what is good. The most discerning Christians ought to be the most encouraging ones.

8. Contentiousness

The problem with the quarrelsome or contentious person is the enjoyment of unnecessary arguments and the love of conflict. They live in combat mode, and develop a ministry that is oppositional in nature. It is one thing to faithfully offer correction when needed, it in another thing to enjoy putting

44. Ibid., 146.

45. Ibid., 148.

people down.

2 Timothy 2:24 says, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.” Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:16, “If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of Christ.”

The Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs was known for being a champion of peace. His book *Irenicum* provides a wealth of wisdom for cultivating an irenic spirit. Burroughs cautions against contentious voices: “Many men are of such spirits as they love to be altogether busied about their brethren’s differences. Their discourses, their pens, and all their ways are about these, and that not to heal them but rather to widen them. You shall not hear them speak of or meddle with their agreements.”⁴⁶

46. Jeremiah Burroughs, *Irenicum: Healing the Divisions Among God’s People* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 391. This entire book is full of gems. “If I must err, considering what our condition is here in this world, I will rather err by too much gentleness and mildness than by too much rigor and severity” (381). “There is in [some] a vehement, strong disposition to contention. These are like salamanders who love and live in the fire. Contentions and strifes that are as tedious to other men as death are their delight. . . . A contentious spirit will always find matter for contention” (206–207). “In these stormy, troublesome times there needs to be much wisdom, faith, love, humility, patience, self-denial, and meekness. All graces are put to work now” (351). “In your disputes let your arguments be as hard as you will, but let your words be soft. Soft words and hard arguments make a good dispute. Gentle language gains much upon the hearts of men” (411). For an excellent treatment of the life of Burroughs, see

Rather than be kind to everyone, they are inconsiderate, at times insulting fellow believers, at times using mockery and coarse language. The mood and tone of the contentious person is insufficiently shaped by the cross of Christ.

Iain Murray, in his biography of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, tells the story of a time when Lloyd-Jones confronted a pastor by the name of T. T. Shields. The men were similar in their theology, but Lloyd-Jones “thought the Baptist leader was sometimes too controversial, too denunciatory, and too censorious.” On one occasion they had lunch together in London, and Lloyd-Jones had an opportunity to share his concern. Shields defended himself, saying that every time he indulges in a dog-fight the sales go up in his ministry. Lloyd-Jones said he was not surprised; a crowd always gathers when there is a dog-fight.

Lloyd-Jones graciously shared that this brother’s ministry had been ruined by becoming too negative and denunciatory. “Why don’t you come back!” Lloyd-Jones appealed. “Drop all this; preach the gospel to people positively and win them!”⁴⁷

A theologically solid ministry can be spoiled simply by the wrong emphasis and tone. No parents would dare to tell their children that tone doesn’t matter, but minimizing the importance of a God-honoring tone has become more common among pastors.

Phillip L. Simpson, *A Life of Gospel Peace: A Biography of Jeremiah Burroughs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).

47. Iain H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years 1899–1939* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 271–273.

There is rising cultural pressure to be argumentative and brash in our speech, rather than to follow God's command to be gracious in our speech. It is becoming more common for pastors to critique and deliberately avoid civility and gentleness. But God says we are to show perfect courtesy to all people (Titus 3:2), kindness to everyone (2 Tim. 2:24), and gentleness toward opponents (2 Tim. 2:25), even as we practice unwavering courage and devotion to the truth.

Of all people, ministers of the gospel should be ministers of encouragement and of grace.

9. Self-Absorption

One of the more common hindrances to seeing grace in others and encouraging others is that we are too focused on ourselves. An absorption with self turns us inward, blinding us to the gifts and graces of others. It is understandable that the cares of our hearts would be many. But we must always be on guard to not get lost in our own minds and concerns.

Self-absorption is not the path of freedom, but the path of bondage and harm. When we are consumed with self and morbidly introspective, spiritual depression is usually not far behind. Soon we realize we are not only failing to see grace in others, we are failing to see grace in ourselves. It is far better to allow the gift of community to pull us outside of ourselves. Invite friends over for a meal. Go to church. Take an interest in others and keep an eye open for grace.

10. Idealism

In chapter 1 of his classic book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains that idealism is one of the great enemies

of community. Idealism is also the enemy of a culture of encouragement.

We all have an ideal of what we believe community should be. But here is the problem, as Bonhoeffer explains it:

The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.⁴⁸

A better way to approach community, and one that is more likely to result in seeing grace, is this: “We enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. . . . We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what He does give us daily.”⁴⁹ When we encounter sin and disappointment in the Christian community, Bonhoeffer says, this is when Christian community really begins, because what binds us together most deeply is the forgiveness we have and extend in Christ.

48. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1954), 27–28.

49. *Ibid.*, 28.

Idealism is the enemy of a culture of grace and encouragement because it makes us frustrated with the imperfections of others, impatient toward slow growers, and cools our affections for the church.

We must always remember: Just because there are smaller amounts of grace in some Christians does not mean there is no grace. We all stumble in many ways, and the pursuit of encouragement usually involves dying to our desires for the church to be what we think it should be.

A Chapter of Hope

I've included a number of the enemies of encouragement I have seen over the years in my own heart and in pastoral ministry. The list is not exhaustive. No one is without sin. On one occasion, even Barnabas, the son of encouragement, was led astray and failed to fully apply the gospel of grace in his relationships (Gal. 2:13). That is why I want to end this chapter with a word of hope.

I mentioned the book Jerry Bridges wrote on sin, called *Respectable Sins*. Bridges starts that book with these words: "I want this to be a book of hope. We are never to wallow hopelessly in our sins. Rather, we are to believe the gospel through which God has dealt with both the guilt of our sin and its dominion over us."⁵⁰

In the same way, I want this chapter to be a chapter of hope. God has indeed dealt with the guilt of sin, and there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). Also consider this: If you are or have ever

50. Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, 9.

been grieved by your own slowness to see grace in others, that is a good place to be. We should not be discouraged but encouraged by genuine conviction of sin, because it is a sign that God is continuing his good work in us.

Do you think that the Holy Spirit who opened our eyes to see the glory of God's grace in the gospel is able to open our eyes a bit further to see grace in those around us? Do you think that Holy Spirit is able to give you the grace to grow in encouragement? He is not only able, he is eager, and he will do it.

Father in Heaven, come and search our hearts. We confess that our sins are many, but your mercy is greater. By the power of your Spirit, guard us from every enemy of encouragement. Fill our hearts with humility, love, and gratefulness, and fill our mouths with godly speech. Make us a people full of discernment, and full of kindness and grace. May you, the God of hope, fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Encouragement

The Blemished Bride of Christ

Christians who have learned from Barnabas are skilled at seeing and celebrating grace in the church of Christ. With eyes full of faith and hearts full of love, they are more aware of beauty than blemishes. They are not cynical, proud, or fault-finders.

God wants all of us to have an encouraging posture toward the local church where he has joined us, toward other churches we have partnered with in gospel mission, and toward the church of Christ throughout the world. There is more grace to be discovered.

Welcome to Corinth

I've already mentioned that C. J. Mahaney taught me a lot about seeing grace. Where did he learn it? C. J. writes, "The

practice of identifying evidences of grace in others is drawn particularly from the opening nine verses of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. I don't think a day goes by that I'm not influenced by this passage."⁵¹ This passage needs to influence us as well.

The church in Corinth had many blemishes and was in need of correction. If you think your church has problems, Corinth is a reminder that it could be worse.

The Corinthians had drifted from the centrality of the message of "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). They were divided by factions and there was quarreling among them (1:10–11; 3:3). They had become "puffed up in favor of one against another" (4:6) and were arrogantly boasting in themselves (4:7).

There was sexual immorality—a man in the church was sleeping with his father's wife. The church was tolerant of this, and proud of their tolerance (5:1–2). They were bringing lawsuits against each other (6:1–8). Many of them were critical of Paul and his leadership (9:1–3). Women were conducting themselves in ways that were not in keeping with God's design (11:4–5).

When the church gathered, it was doing more harm than good. "When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse" (11:17). Some were showing up drunk for the Lord's Supper (11:21). Their use of spiritual gifts was plagued by pride and disorder, which Paul addresses at length in chapters 12–14.

51. Mahaney, *Humility*, 98.

In light of these things, it is no surprise that Paul's letter to the church is primarily corrective. And there are hints of the correction from the very beginning of the letter: Paul asserts his apostleship (1:1) and adjusts their spiritual pride by reminding them they are spiritually united to all Christians throughout the world (1:2).

Commending the Imperfect Church

And yet, the beginning of Paul's letter is a remarkable example of seeing grace in hard places. Paul was previously on the receiving end of Barnabas' encouraging advocacy (Acts 9:27), and this must have left a lasting impression. Paul communicates his gratitude to God for the Corinthian believers, rejoices in the grace at work in their lives, and expresses his confidence for their future.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor. 1:4–9).

Paul wants this troubled church that was misusing the spiritual gifts to be encouraged in that same area, aware of the abundance of spiritual gifts in their lives (1 Cor. 1:5). He reminds them that Christ will sustain them to the end (1:8). He later

reminds them that the Lord will commend them when Christ returns (4:5), and Paul himself commends them in the present: “Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you” (11:2).

This is amazing. How can these verses not transform our view of others? Paul sees grace! Paul is an encourager. And God calls us to the same. C. J. Mahaney writes,

Only those who are humble can consistently identify evidences of grace in others who need adjustment. It’s something the proud and the self-righteous are incapable of. But Paul, in his humility, saw the Corinthians from a divine perspective, and he allowed this perspective to determine his attitude toward them. And let me say by the authority of God’s Word that you and I must hold this same perspective toward the believers around us. After all, if Paul can find evidences of grace even in the Corinthian church, what possible excuse could you and I have for our not finding evidences of grace in our fellow believers?⁵²

Honest About Flaws

Imagine you are a member of the church in Corinth. Someone posted a video on social media of a few people drunk at communion. Another member and his father’s wife have their scandalous story on the news and on late night television. The church name is trending on X (formerly Twitter). Paul has been cancelled as a conference speaker because this is one of his churches, and anyone associated with Corinth has been

52. Ibid., 100.

considered unsound.

How will you view the church?

Corinth is not the only church with flaws. In the book of Acts, even when the church was filled with the Spirit, there was lying (Acts 5:3), conflict (Acts 6:1), and reluctance to take the gospel to Gentiles (Acts 10:13–16). In Revelation 2–3, there is sin, theological compromise, and immorality in many of the churches.

If churches are troubled today, the realism of the biblical portrait of the church should encourage us. As the Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith* says, “Even true churches are imperfect: they often contain a mixture of unbelievers hidden among the true flock and are vulnerable to theological error and moral failure.”⁵³ Sadly, churches and pastors do sometimes fail people. More than a few Christians have been hurt by the church.

We should be honest about our own sin and the imperfections of the church. At the same time, we should respond the way Christ does—with unwavering love and commitment to the church. The church’s imperfections shouldn’t cause us to distance ourselves from the church, since they don’t cause Christ to distance himself from the church.

Charles Spurgeon has a helpful insight on finding the perfect church:

If I had never joined a church till I had found one that was perfect, I should never have joined one at all; and the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect church

53. Sovereign Grace Churches *Statement of Faith* 12.2, “The Local Church.”

after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us.⁵⁴

The Church is Not Lame

It's not hard to find Christians who are critical. To adopt a negative posture toward the church and her failings is both easy and common—*easy* because it is in keeping with the natural tendency of our hearts, and *common* because it fits the spirit of the age in this cultural moment.

While accountability ought to be welcomed by Christians everywhere, I don't think we need more books telling us how messed up modern evangelicalism is and how compromised pastors are. It would be better to spend our time searching out things to be thankful for.

Kevin DeYoung wrote a book called *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion*. He wrote it because, he says, "I see the church derided with mockery and scorn. I see critics exaggerating her weaknesses and incapable of affirming any of her strengths. . . . I see lots of my peers who have 20/20 vision for the church's failings, but are nearsighted to their own pride."⁵⁵

This is what has become common: exaggerating the church's weaknesses and failing to affirm her strengths. Too many people have a myopic view of the church, focusing relentlessly on her failures, especially the church in America. People

54. Charles Spurgeon, "The Best Donation," (No. 2234) April 5, 1891, The Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, England.

55. Kevin DeYoung, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 138.

are building platforms as critics of other Christians. Popular books and podcasts put the spotlight on what is wrong with the bride of Christ and where shepherds are failing. They do not seek to build up, but to tear down.

I want to challenge the popular spirit of negativity and concern that says the church is lame and most Christians are unfaithful. I am not suggesting that there is no place to be concerned. But when we speak with sweeping generalizations of the failures of pastors and churches in Reformed evangelicalism, or when we use derogatory language to describe large portions of the body of Christ, I want to register my objection. It is much easier to rail against evangelical elites, “Big Eva” and celebrity culture than it is to identify where God is at work. It is much easier to find faults than to see strengths.

God wants us to look for faithful Christians and faithful churches, and to rejoice in his grace.

A Caution for Positive People

I want to add an important qualifier here, and it’s this: A posture of encouragement toward the blemished bride of Christ does not mean we should always be positive and affirming. That is not what we see in 1 Corinthians, or anywhere else in the New Testament. Pastors in particular must remember that an essential aspect of faithful pastoral ministry is rebuking those who contradict sound doctrine (Titus 1:9), correcting opponents (2 Tim. 2:25), warning churches about others (Phil. 3:2), and contending for the faith (Jude 1:3).

While it is not the focus of this book, it might help avoid misunderstanding and misapplication for me to share that I do have concerns about the church of Christ in our day. How

could we not be troubled? And how can we be silent where the church is vulnerable or compromised?

I am concerned that theology has been displaced from too many churches, and confessional commitments are thin. The mission of the church has been expanded beyond the New Testament teaching. Some churches have abandoned the centrality of the gospel for cultural and political issues. The past decade has only increased my concern, as we have seen the rise of critical theory, nationalism, gender ideology, and ethnic pride among Christians.

We continue to witness the erosion of biblical complementarianism, as many Christians, and even some pastors, are drifting toward either a tepid, embarrassed complementarianism or a brash hyper-complementarianism.

Where are the Spirit-filled churches like we see in the book of Acts, with awe in every soul, passionately devoted to teaching, fellowship, and prayer, walking in joyful generosity and absolute purity, eagerly maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

It would not be hard to continue. My purpose in sharing these things in this context is simply to demonstrate and emphasize the point that seeing grace is not the same as being only positive. We must never bury our head in the sand in the name of encouragement. That is pseudo-encouragement and a failure to confront reality.

If affirmation is a strength for you, and part of your natural disposition—if you are naturally a nice, friendly, positive person—here is a caution: A passion for affirmation and encouragement severed from a passion for truth is deadly. It would be the ruinous end of our churches and the

denomination as a whole.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones is one of my historical heroes. He frequently spoke of the importance of maintaining negatives—pointing out error, exposing wrong, and engaging controversy. “One of the first signs that a man is ceasing to be truly evangelical,” Lloyd-Jones writes, “is that he ceases to be concerned about negatives, and keeps saying, We must always be positive.”⁵⁶ J. Gresham Machen correctly believed it is not enough to say what is good and true, we must also make clear what is wrong. “Truth cannot be stated clearly at all without being set over against error. Thus a large part of the New Testament is polemic.”⁵⁷

That is the qualifier. Don’t confuse the pursuit of encouragement with undiscerning positivity. Be passionate about the truth, and be passionate about identifying grace.

Seeing Grace in Other Churches

Those with the spirit of Barnabas celebrate grace in their local church and beyond their local church. Their vision of grace extends to what God is doing in other churches. That’s precisely what we see in Acts 11, when Barnabas goes to Antioch. By going to a church beyond Jerusalem and rejoicing in God’s activity there, Barnabas teaches us to see grace beyond our own church.

56. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions 1942–1977* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 319.

57. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism: 100th Anniversary Edition* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023), 178.

Commenting on Barnabas in Antioch, James Montgomery Boice writes,

These were not his people. Antioch was not his home city. But God was working, and he was pleased. We need to learn from Barnabas in this respect—to be happy when God works somewhere else. All of us are happy (or at least most of the time are happy) when God works among us, blessing our denomination, church, people, or family. When he blesses somewhere else, well, we are not always so happy. We are restrained in our enthusiasm. Not only did Barnabas rejoice at what was going on, he also encouraged the believers.⁵⁸

It is easy to see grace in our closest friends and in those who agree with us, but more difficult to see grace in other churches.

Paul's letters make clear that he wanted churches to be aware of evidences of grace in other churches, regardless of whether they had ever visited those churches. "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia" (2 Cor. 8:1). Paul let all the churches know about the steadfastness and faith of the church in Thessalonica: "We ourselves boast about you in the churches of God" (2 Thess. 1:4).

When a congregation abounds in love for other churches, as the Thessalonian church did for Christians throughout Macedonia, in Philippi and Berea, Paul encourages them to do this more and more (1 Thess. 4:9–10). Paul wants the church

58. James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 200.

in Colossae to be encouraged by what God is doing beyond their own church (Col. 4:7–9).

How Does God View Other Churches?

How do you view other churches? Are you skilled at seeing grace in the broader body of Christ? Tim Chester writes,

Perhaps you look at other churches with critical eyes. But how does God view them? He sees their faults (along with yours). But above all he sees them wrapped in Christ’s righteousness, and so he loves to bless them. Theological differences may limit how much we can cooperate. But all who are in Christ are brothers and sisters. . . . We need to believe justification by faith not only for ourselves but for others as well. Satan sees their faults and makes their faults the focus of his attention, which leads to accusation. God sees their faults and makes Christ the focus of his attention, which leads to affirmation. And we should be more like God than like Satan!⁵⁹

Pastor Caleb Batchelor wrote a delightful little book called *Visible Grace: Seeing the Church the Way Jesus Does*. His concern is that too often in the church we “glance at grace and stare at sin.”⁶⁰ He includes a chapter on visible grace in other churches. Batchelor writes,

59. Tim Chester, *Reforming Joy: A Conversation between Paul, the Reformers, and the Church Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 55–56.

60. Caleb Batchelor, *Visible Grace: Seeing the Church the Way Jesus Does* (Leyland, England: 10Publishing, 2024), 5.

When you think about churches in your city and around the world, what's your first impulse? Celebrating God's work in those churches? Or mulling over ways they're 'less healthy' than your church? . . . Sadly, we often . . . make our distinctives the most important things about us—over-emphasizing tertiary things, under-emphasizing the main things, and feeding a tribalistic tendency.⁶¹

Batchelor says one way to combat this tendency is, without minimizing the importance of doctrinal precision, to “marvel at God's beauty in churches who are doing things ‘wrong.’”⁶²

That is what Paul had learned to do, and models for us. It's the only way he was able to see grace in Corinth. It's what led him to look at those who preached from defective motives and harmed him, and respond by rejoicing in their ministry, even as he pointed out their sin: “Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (Phil. 1:15–18). And it's why Paul wanted churches to know that the church of Christ that God has joined us to is much bigger than our local church. Each church is “called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2).

A Precious Doctrine

The doctrine of the universal church should be precious to every Christian. It is a reminder that in Christ and by his blood, all believers—in every century, every place, and every denomination—are identified, associated, and spiritually bound

61. *Ibid.*, 18.

62. *Ibid.*, 18.

together as the one Christian church, a universal brotherhood and sisterhood.

The Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith* affirms, “The universal church is the true, worshipping community of God’s people, composed of all the elect for all time.”⁶³ Ephesians 4:4 says, “There is one body,” and Jesus teaches that there is “one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). This means “All of God’s people are united in one body.”⁶⁴

What comes to your mind when you think of the church? Conrad Mbewe writes,

We must not think of the church primarily in terms of our own local church or denomination. We belong to the body of Christ that encompasses the whole planet. The church is in Africa, in America, in Europe, in Asia, and so on. It is everywhere. Your local church is only a local manifestation of this big, International body.⁶⁵

There are many good and glorious things Christ is doing in his church throughout the world. If we confine our awareness of the grace of God to our own local church, we will be exceedingly narrow, and we rob ourselves of opportunities to encourage and be encouraged.

Herman Bavinck says that honoring the universality of the church uniquely strengthens our faith, comforts us, and

63. Sovereign Grace Churches *Statement of Faith*, 12.2 “The Universal Church.”

64. Ibid.

65. Conrad Mbewe, *God’s Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 30.

guards against division—“such a person can never be narrow-minded and narrow-hearted.” Therefore, “The affirmation of the catholicity of the church and of the universalism of Christianity is of the greatest significance in our time, which is so rife with errors and schisms.”⁶⁶

D. A. Carson says the problem with factionalism is that it overlooks the vast heritage and wealth believers enjoy, and how much there is to receive from a broad range of Christian leaders and denominations. Rather, he says, Christians must learn to see and appreciate what is right and good in a broad range of denominations, churches, and leaders.⁶⁷

When a Barnabas Spirit is Lacking

One reason I care about the posture Christians have toward other churches and denominations is personal. I know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of something other than the spirit of Barnabas. In the past, there have been times when people outside our churches have looked at Sovereign Grace and have seen more sin than grace. Over the years, I have seen faithful pastors and healthy churches slandered by many. Uncharitable judgments, reckless words, and blatant lies have sown suspicion. Good reputations have been damaged.

In all of this there has been the lack of a Barnabas spirit, and a failure to embrace and apply the obligations laid upon us

66. Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church.” https://bavinckinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Bavinck_Catholicity_CTJ27.pdf

67. D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 84–89.

all by the doctrine of the unity and catholicity of the church.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne has a letter on "Communion with Brethren of Other Denominations." He says he has looked at this issue from the brink of eternity, and is certain that Christians will regret, as he himself has regretted, the lack of greater caution in speaking of the doings and motives of leaders in other denominations.⁶⁸

Our fellow Christians are those for whom Christ died. He is at work in and through them. The church is the beloved of the Lord, his precious bride, awesome as an army with banners. Yes, there are plenty of weaknesses and sins. But why search out those and dwell on them? There is a better way to live.

Richard Sibbes wisely counsels,

Men must not be too curious into prying into the weaknesses of others. We should labor rather to see what they have that is for eternity, to incline our heart to love them, than unto that weakness which the Spirit of God will in time consume.⁶⁹

Encouraged by Partnership

An understanding of the universal church moves individual churches outside themselves, informing the way pastors and churches relate to each other. It deepens our passion

68. Andrew A. Bonar, "Communion with Brethren of Other Denominations," in *Memoir and Remains of R.M. M'Cheyne* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 611.

69. Richard Sibbes, *The Works of Richard Sibbes, Volume 1*, "The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax" (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 57.

for partnership. The primary place we celebrate grace in the broader body of Christ is in the churches in our union.

One of the reasons God joins churches together in partnership is for the mutual encouragement of their pastors and members. This is how he strengthens churches. In Sovereign Grace, we are not only united in doctrine, mission, and limited aspects of governance, we are also united in fellowship. “Our fellowship extends beyond mere denominational affiliation; we are committed to applying the gospel together in relationships that foster mutual encouragement.”⁷⁰

John Murray writes, “The whole denomination is a unit, and if one member suffers all the others suffer with it, if one member is honored all the others rejoice with it.”⁷¹ As a pastor, this has been a tremendous source of strength, comfort, and endurance. Partnership among churches is the reminder that we are not alone. We pray for each other. We serve one another. We strive side by side. And we accomplish far more together than we could on our own.

When I think of the founding generation of Sovereign Grace pastors, or when I think of the ways God has used our Pastors College, or when I consider the songs that have been written and the ways we have been served by Sovereign Grace music, my heart rejoices. Whenever I receive an update on the advance of the gospel in our global partnership, I am strengthened in faith. And when I see the young men and

70. From our Shared Values, www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shared-values

71. John Murray, “Corporate Responsibility” in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume One* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 278.

women God is raising up to serve our churches in the future, I praise the Lord.

Learn to see grace in your church and beyond your church—in your own nation and in other nations; in your own denomination and in other groups of churches.

The Future of the Church

If you live on the internet (please don't do this), and judge by what you hear the most, there is no end to the things you will be discouraged and concerned about in the church. And certainly, the bride of Christ is presently blemished, and there are many ways the church falls short. There are opportunities to repent, to lament, to look to Christ, and to change.

But my concern is that too often we fail to see grace in the bride of Christ. We fail to thank God for the pastors, churches, and denominations that are faithful in the Lord's work. We pass over the extraordinary wealth of biblical scholarship and commentaries that have been written in recent years. We take for granted the godly influence of faithful pastors, healthy churches, good ministries, solid publishers, effective missions agencies, and Christ-exalting song writers. All we see are threats, weaknesses, and compromise. This ought not be.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins has written, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." We can also say that the church is charged with the grace of God.

We need more sons and daughters of encouragement. We need to learn to see the church the way Jesus does.

I thank God that despite our many sins, Jesus delights to detect grace in his bride. He sees his church, not only for what we presently are, but what we will one day be by his

grace. Ephesians 5:25–27 says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

Presently, our churches have spots and wrinkles. But Christ is cleansing his church with the Word, and his bride will one day be holy and without blemish. He loves and encourages his people, and he calls us to do the same.

Paul found grace in Corinth. What possible excuse could we have for not finding grace in the church today?

Honor Everyone

In 2014, five days before Mother's Day, basketball star Kevin Durant gave an emotional and memorable speech as he received the MVP award. He expressed gratitude for dozens of people, and then took time to honor his mom for all her hard work and sacrifices in raising him and his brother. He shared his favorite memories of his mom. When he was young, she would wake him up in the middle of the night to make him run hills and do push-ups. She was there to cheer him on at his first games.

Durant concluded his comments about his mom by declaring her to be "the real MVP." Tears of appreciation filled her eyes as everyone present applauded her. That moment resonated with many people. It's a beautiful example of what it means to honor someone.

This chapter has the goal of promoting two practices: the first is encouraging others publicly, and the second is encouraging unbelievers.

The Competitive Command

Romans 12:10 gives the only competitive command in Scripture: “Love one another with brotherly affection. *Outdo one another in showing honor.*” We are not only commanded to honor one another, we are to make it our aim to outdo others in showing honor. God’s concern is not that we would be too excessive in honoring others, but that we would be too stingy.

At the end of Romans, Paul practices what he preaches. Romans 16:1–16 is full of personal, public commendations. He mentions over two dozen names, often including something specific about them, and commends many.

- “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae . . . for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well” (v. 1–2).
- “Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well” (v. 3–4).
- “Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you” (v. 6).
- “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles” (v. 7).
- “Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord” (v. 12).

- “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well” (v. 13).

It is all the more striking to consider that Paul had never been to the church in Rome. Yet, Paul is publicly communicating the evidences of grace in these men and women. Some of them he met in his travels. Others, he had heard reports of their faithfulness. All of them are on the receiving end of Paul’s gratitude, affection, and honor.

Commenting on Romans 16, Kevin DeYoung writes,

Paul wanted the church to be quick to encourage, not quick to condemn. He wanted them overflowing in praise, instead of overflowing in criticism. He wanted the church to be warm and invigorating, not cold and life-quickening. He didn’t want a church of boasters or flatterers. But he wanted a congregation where the members sought to honor one another above themselves, a place where God’s grace was noticed and lifted up for the glory of God. He wanted more sunshine, fewer clouds.⁷²

When Encouragement Goes Public

To honor is to acknowledge worth. It means we value, respect, and appreciate others. To show honor is to outwardly express our respect and gratitude in actions and words. A culture of encouragement includes a culture of honoring. Honoring is when encouragement goes public.

72. Kevin DeYoung, “Are You Sunshine or a Cloud?,” Sept. 20, 2011. <https://clearlyreformed.org/are-you-sunshine-or-a-cloud/>

In Sovereign Grace Churches, we have sought to create a culture of outdoing one another in showing honor. At times, people think publicly honoring others is just a Sovereign Grace thing. But the practice of commending others, not just privately but publicly, is biblically informed.

Paul's honoring of others is not confined to Romans 16, but is pervasive throughout his letters and ministry.

In Colossians 4, he tells the church that Tychicus "is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord" (Col. 4:7). Onesimus is "our faithful and beloved brother" (Col. 4:9). Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus were a comfort to Paul (Col. 4:10–11). Epaphras, honored for his love and prayers, is "always struggling on your behalf in his prayers" and "he has worked hard for you" (Col. 4:12–13).

In Philippians 2, Paul highlights the example of Timothy and Epaphroditus for all the believers in Philippi. Honoring Timothy, he says, "I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. . . . As a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel" (2:20–22). Epaphroditus is commended as "my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need" (2:25). "So," Paul commands them all, "receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men" (2:29).

In 2 Corinthians 8:16–24, Paul commends Titus and several other brothers who were sent to the church. "But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you" (v. 16). "And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters" (v. 22). "As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit" (v. 23).

Reflecting on these commendations, Charles Spurgeon says,

How beautiful to see Paul so praising his brethren—very humble, commonplace persons as compared with himself, but he admires the grace of God in them. How very different from the general spirit of depreciation that you find even among Christian men—afraid to praise anybody, lest they should be exalted above measure. You might leave that to the devil. He will take care that they are not exalted above measure but you need not be as particular about that. Often the best thing that can be done for God’s servant is to encourage him, for, though you may not know it, he may have a multitude of depressions, heavy toil and earnest care, and much watching, which may bring him down. Paul speaks well of the brotherhood: let us try to do the same.⁷³

We learn from Paul that mature leadership, and mature Christianity, publicly honors others. Of course, our commendations are not limited to the public realm—we should commend publicly and privately, in the presence of those we are honoring and in their absence.

This mutual honoring should mark churches, pastoral teams, marriages, and friendships. Most of us are not in danger of praising others too much.

73. Charles Spurgeon, “Joining the Church,” delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Oct. 24th, 1869.

Honoring Unbelievers?

Does the Bible teach us to honor, encourage, and affirm unbelievers? Yes, it does. Early Christians gave thought to how Christians should conduct themselves in the midst of a hostile world, surrounded by evil practices and ungodly pressures. Repeated commands are given to the churches as normative descriptions of how they are to treat “everyone” and “all people.”

Titus 3:2 commands Christians to “speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.” In the context of relating to outsiders, Colossians 4:6 commands, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

The book of 1 Peter is especially relevant given the cultural opposition they were experiencing. God commands the church in 1 Peter 2:17, “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” A number of lessons can be drawn from this passage: First, all people deserve the same respect as the Emperor. Second, there is a unique affection we have for fellow Christians. Third, only God is to be feared. And fourth, Christians are duty-bound by God to honor everyone.

The call to honor everyone does not mean we approve of the evil others do. Affirming others should never condone their sin. There is an approach to honor and affirmation that is soft on the truth and is lacking backbone—that is not the Biblical path of honoring everyone.

Rather, the honor we are to show to everyone means we care about their good, we affirm what we can in them, we guard their reputation, and we address them—even when we

are expressing disagreement and speaking hard truths—with “gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15–16).

Carl Trueman highlights how the early Christian apologists addressed the Roman Empire: “What is so interesting when compared to some of the ways many Christians, right and left, do so today is how respectful these ancient apologists were.”⁷⁴ In the midst of a hostile culture, they did not spend their time on denouncing the evils of the world and confronting the emperor. Rather than repay evil for evil, they sought to conduct themselves in a manner that was honorable in the sight of all (Rom. 12:17). “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable” (1 Pet. 2:12).

It is tempting to think that cultural decline and opposition requires something different. But honoring everyone is the old and timeless way for the people of Christ, commended by Christ and by the New Testament apostles.⁷⁵

Even when we are mistreated, we rejoice and look for opportunities to bless those who harm us. Romans 12:14 says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Commenting on the word “bless,” Matthew Henry

74. Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Refined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 176.

75. D. A. Carson gives this advice in engaging our secular age: “Christians ought to encourage and practice civility. Such civility is not to be confused with a weakening of Christian convictions or a distinct lack of courage that simply ducks all the hard questions. It means, rather, courtesy, respect, winsomeness, not least when we are affirming that another’s position is indefensible.” *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 172.

says, “Speak well of them. If there be any thing in them that is commendable and praiseworthy, take notice of it, and mention it to their honor.”⁷⁶ Nothing is more countercultural in our day than blessing those who sin against us.

The Doctrines that Expand Our Encouragement

Here are three biblical truths that expand our encouragement beyond the church, and compel us to discern and delight in God’s activity in unbelievers.

First, the image of God in unbelievers. In Genesis 1, the days of creation culminate in something uniquely glorious among all that is created. God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Nothing else is made in God’s image, and nothing reveals God more fully than men and women. Steve DeWitt writes, “Each human person individually bears more of a reflection of God than the rest of the universe combined.”⁷⁷

All people are made in God’s image. This means that we are all created with a special connection with God for the purpose of being a special reflection of God. The image of God is a status, revealing the dignity God has given us, and a standard, revealing the destiny God intends for us and how we are to live. John Piper puts it this way: “The *imago Dei* [the image of God] is that in man which constitutes him as

76. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6, *Acts to Revelation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 375.

77. Steve DeWitt, *Eyes Wide Open: Enjoying God in Everything* (Grand Rapids, MI: Credo House Publishers, 2012), 74.

him-whom-God-loves.”⁷⁸

Scripture uses the language of the image of God to affirm something positive about humans. Even though humanity rebelled against God in our sin, we continue in the same status of being made in the image of God (Gen. 5:1, Gen. 9:6). In James 3:9, God says we are not to curse people—we should not hate or disrespect them—because even those we are most likely to curse are “made in the likeness of God.”

Someone once said that Psalm 8 is Genesis 1:26–28 set to music. In Psalm 8, the psalmist marvels at the astonishing dignity of humanity as those “crowned . . . with glory and honor,” ruling over God’s creation. Every person you have ever met is “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14).

Sam Crabtree asks, “Is there anything to praise in the unregenerate person? Yes, the image of God.”⁷⁹

Second, common grace in unbelievers. Wayne Grudem defines common grace in his *Systematic Theology*: “Common Grace is the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation.”⁸⁰ The word “common” simply means that this grace is shared by all people. It has also been called “everywhere grace.”

By the grace of God, unbelievers do things that are good and kind. They often work hard, value justice and honesty,

78. John Piper, “The Image of God: An Approach From Biblical and Systemic Theology,” published in *Studia Biblica et Theologica*, March 1971. www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-image-of-god

79. Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation*, 21.

80. Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology, Second Edition: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 803.

and are capable of remarkable creativity and innovation. We observe these qualities in unbelievers.

This is why parents can celebrate evidences of grace in the lives of their children, even before they are saved. It is important for parents to call attention to what God is doing in the lives of their children, to affirm what is good, kind, and true.

The doctrine of common grace is also why we can encourage school teachers, the faithful mailman, the joyful waiter, the master chef, the hard-working President, the coach who serves our children, the skilled plumber, and the barista who makes a perfect Americano. For the Christian, the world is full of grace, and everywhere we look we see the gracious activity of God.

Richard Mouw writes, “We must be diligent in our efforts to discover, honor, and appreciate any of God’s good gifts that might be at work in the larger human community, and common grace teaching has inspired many Christian people to engage in such efforts.”⁸¹

Third, the scope of God’s delight. Is there any sense in which God takes delight in the activity or accomplishments of unbelievers? It is true that there is a fundamental sense in which the unbeliever is incapable of pleasing God—Romans 8:8 says, “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” This means they cannot properly submit to God’s law, and that none of their actions are morally acceptable to God. Likewise, Hebrews 11:7 says “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for

81. Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 28.

whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” The Lord takes no covenantal, fatherly pleasure in anything the unbeliever does.

At the same time, there is another sense in which God takes creational delight in reflections of himself wherever they appear. John Piper writes, “There is a sense in which God does delight in the just balances and honest weights of unbelievers, namely, when he looks at their honesty and justice as fragments of his own divine work expressing . . . his own upright image.”⁸²

Because God delights in himself, he delights broadly in the display of his goodness, truth, and beauty in those who bear his image.

Richard Mouw writes,

God takes delight in various human states of affairs, even when they are displayed in the lives of non-elect human beings. . . . Let me be concrete: I think God takes delight in Benjamin Franklin’s wit and in Tiger Wood’s putts and in some well-crafted narrative paragraphs in a Salman Rushdie novel, even if these accomplishments are in fact achieved by non-Christian people.⁸³

Building Bridges

Expanding our encouragement to unbelievers is one way to obey God’s command to honor everyone. It also has the effect, at times, of gaining a hearing for the gospel. Sam Crabtree

82. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God* (New York, NY: Multnomah, 2012), 244.

83. Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair*, 35–36.

makes a compelling case for affirming unbelievers in his book *Practicing Affirmation*, and explains the role affirmation can play in our outreach. “Affirmation is a way to gain a hearing for the gospel. . . . Our listeners will be more inclined to hear us if they believe we’re not angry at them, but grateful for them.”⁸⁴

This has been described as the ministry of building bridges. On the one hand, the church needs strong walls to define and defend sound doctrine, and to guard against theological drift. On the other hand, we also need welcoming bridges that win a hearing and adorn the truth for outsiders. I am emphasizing bridges here because my topic is encouragement, but both are vital to the health of the church.

Commending others, respecting others, and calling attention to common ground is the work of building bridges. We need to remember that in our engagement with the world, our goal is not to score points, but to persuade people. It does little good to win arguments if we are not winning people.

The Bible makes clear that honoring and affirming others plays an important role in our evangelism. The book of Proverbs teaches that “sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness” (Prov. 16:21), and “a soft answer turns away wrath” (Prov. 15:1). One way to apply those Proverbs is by building bridges. Alongside challenging and confronting unbelievers, we should be commending them.

Alexander Strauch writes,

If you want to win and persuade people in a godly manner, speak with gracious, edifying, encouraging words. Choose your words wisely and consider how to build up others,

84. Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation*, 21.

not tear them down. Learn to speak as a peacemaker, encourager, admonisher, and comforter. Graciously bless even those who speak evil against you.⁸⁵

The evangelistic ministry of Paul in the book of Acts is an instructive example. It would be a serious mistake to see Paul's evangelism as primarily affirming rather than confrontational. At the same time, it would also be a mistake to miss the ways he leads with affirmation. Affirmation is what often paves the way for disagreeing and calling people to repentance.

It has often been observed that in Paul's sermon in Athens, in Acts 17, he goes out of his way to find common ground, even as he brings a message of confrontation. He commends the audience in verses 22–23 for being religious, and there are various points of agreement in the foreground. Paul also “appealed to the Greek philosophers by interacting with their thought, even quoting their own writers in a well-informed, respectful way.”⁸⁶

In Acts 22, Paul addresses the crowd as “Brothers and fathers” (v. 1) before emphasizing their shared Jewish heritage and commending their zeal for God (v. 3). In Acts 24:15, he teaches the final resurrection as a point of common ground with Jewish belief. In Acts 26:27, Paul builds on the common ground of the prophetic writings and appeals to Agrippa as a pious Jew.

In his study of Paul in the book of Acts, Jerram Barrs writes,

85. Alexander Strauch, *If You Bite and Devour: Biblical Principles for Handling Conflict* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 2011), 73.

86. *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2122.

Paul not only respected his hearers as people made by God but also made the effort to find ideas he could approve. Paul built a bridge to his hearers by searching for aspects of truth in their thinking and of virtue in their lives that could be commended.⁸⁷

Look For Opportunities

There have been two main points in this chapter: First, God wants his people to outdo one another in showing honor, including public commendation. Second, the command to honor others is not restricted to fellow believers, but has implications for our engagement with the world.

So, look for opportunities to commend others. Search out what is praiseworthy. Live and speak in a manner that is pleasing to the God who saved us. Followers of Christ are those who honor everyone.

87. Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 203.

Creating a Culture of Encouragement

Through the Great Depression of the 1930s and through World War II, there was a group of Christian creatives who met in Oxford for camaraderie, laughter, support, and feedback on their works in progress. Nineteen men met for a total of seventeen years. Among them were writers, painters, historians, theologians, and actors. The group called themselves the Inklings, and the most famous participants were C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

The group met through war, loss, and social turmoil. Oxford had become a military compound. The university buildings were full, not of students but of wounded soldiers and officers training for war. At a time when peace had vanished and hope was scarce, many lost heart. But the Inklings found strength and joy in this circle of friends.

The Inklings banded together to enjoy each other's company and encourage one another. They wrote to publishers, urging them to publish the books of others in the group. Tolkien said that without the unceasing encouragement of Lewis, *The Lord of the Rings* would have never been completed.

For the sake of our joy and our perseverance, we all need a community of encouragement. God's desire is not simply to have a few outstanding individual encouragers, but to forge a culture of encouragement in the church. Such culture is not found, it is made—created by ordinary Christians like us.

In this last chapter, I want to consider how we can all do our part to create a culture of encouragement.

Near the Cross

An encouraging community is a cross-centered community. The cross of Christ is the power of God and the pulpit of his love. At Calvary there is an endless supply of strength for weak and weary sinners. Others may fail to encourage you, but Christ will never fail you.

In order to be an encouragement to others, our own souls must first be encouraged in the gospel, strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. By looking to Jesus and considering him, we will not grow weary or fainthearted in the great Christian race (Heb. 12:1–3). Our sin tempts us to despair, our sorrows easily discourage us, but the cross speaks a better word. Christ has loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood (Rev. 1:5). “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

The cross fills our hearts with the courage that comes from being known and loved by God. A community of the cross will be a community of encouragement, because our life together is built upon the best news the world has ever known.

In the gospel we not only see the heart of Christ for us, but his heart for all his people. Abiding in Christ fills us with his joy and inclines us to see his grace in others.

Prioritizing Encouragement

Encouragement is one of the 7 Shaping Virtues of Sovereign Grace Churches, which is our way of saying that we want every member in every one of our churches to prioritize and pursue this fruit of the gospel.

Prioritize encouragement through study. Mine the Scriptures for its teaching on encouragement. Read *Practicing Affirmation* by Sam Crabtree, *Humility* by C. J. Mahaney, and *Visible Grace* by Caleb Batchelor. Read Kyle Huber's article on encouragement in the Sovereign Grace Journal.⁸⁸ Think of how your gifts can be used to encourage others. Consider creating a list of practical ways to communicate grace to those in your life.

Study encouragement with others. Friends and small groups can discuss:

- Who is one of the most encouraging people you know, and what can you learn from their example?
- When did you receive an encouragement that was

88. Kyle Huber, "Encouragement: Celebrating Evidences of Grace," *Sovereign Grace Journal: Our Shaping Virtues*, no. 5 (October 2022): 55–64.

especially meaningful to you?

- What Bible verse has encouraged you in life, and how has it strengthened you?

Whatever is Commendable

Philippians 4:8 is a call to the discipline of Christian thinking, a command to focus relentlessly on the good and admire what is praiseworthy: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

The way that God brings his peace into our lives, guarding our relationships from destructive tendencies and our minds from sinful anxiety, is by empowering us to set our minds on a wide range of positive realities that are excellent and praiseworthy. Philippians 4:8 contains six adjectives and two nouns in a list of eight categories to think about. There is certainly overlap in the categories.

The command to think about these things means we are to ponder them. Slowly and carefully think about these things. Meditate. Let your mind dwell here.

Whatever is true. We should think about truth more than error. What is true? The glory of our salvation is true. The riches of God’s grace are true. The sacrifice of Christ for sinners and his triumph over death and hell is true. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. In Sovereign Grace, we have an entire *Statement of Faith* to help Christians think about what is true.

Whatever is honorable. This word could be translated noble or dignified. It is used in the Pastoral Epistles to refer to what

deacons (1 Tim. 3:8), women (3:11), and older men (Titus 2:2) ought to be. Who is worthy of respect? Who shines as an honorable example? Set your mind there.

Whatever is just. Where are acts of justice and righteousness done for Christ? Where are orphans and widows visited in their affliction? Where do the oppressed go free, the hungry receive bread, and the homeless find homes? (Isa. 58:6–7) In the midst of a world of injustice, God’s people are to set our minds on what is just.

Whatever is pure. Purity does not begin with our actions but with our thought life. Rather than setting our minds on filth, indecency, and immorality, set our minds on what is pure.

Whatever is lovely. The world is full of beauty that brings delight—it’s there in music, in books, in poetry, in art, and in sunsets and forests. Yes, the world is badly broken. But God is not honored, nor are hearts encouraged, by fixating upon the shadows. There is loveliness all around us. Search it out. Rejoice in it. Invite others into it.

Whatever is commendable. All around us people are making admirable sacrifices, praiseworthy decisions, and choosing commendable actions. When there is a job well done, we should think about it and celebrate it. When there is spiritual growth in someone’s life, it shouldn’t escape our notice. God commands us to set our minds on the strengths and accomplishments of others, being quick to see what is commendable in them. So many of our conflicts could be avoided or resolved if we determined to think about the commendable.

The last two phrases summarize the list—Whatever is excellent and worthy of praise.

All of these qualities are revealed uniquely and supremely

in Jesus Christ. Our minds cannot be too full of the excellency and glory of our Savior.

God is praiseworthy, and he admires what is praiseworthy. The same happy obligation rests on us. God has filled the world with excellence, and he has put no limits on the amount of commendable and praiseworthy realities we can search out and rejoice in.

This is not only the way to honor God, it is the path of joy and flourishing. As C. S. Lewis once said, “If we do not admire [what is praiseworthy], we shall be stupid, insensible, and great losers.”⁸⁹

Leading with Encouragement

Pastors are uniquely called to reflect the heart of our heavenly Father by searching out and calling attention to God’s grace at work among his people. This is fundamental to every pastor’s job description. It should influence our pastoral teams and the leadership culture of the church.

The priority of encouragement should shape our preaching. The people of God gather, in all their weariness and struggles, expectant that they will receive fresh encouragement for their souls from God’s Word.

The Puritan Richard Sibbes was known as the Sweet Dropper and the Heavenly Richard Sibbes because his sermons were so full of gospel encouragements. His book *The Bruised Reed* has been used by God to strengthen many Christians over the

89. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958), 92.

centuries.⁹⁰ We need more of that kind of preaching today.

Kevin DeYoung writes,

It's tempting to think that every good sermon leaves every Christian feeling guilty for something. So every sermon about holiness leaves everyone feeling unholy. Every sermon on prayer makes people feel guilty for not praying more. Every sermon on evangelism causes the whole congregation to squirm in supposed disobedience. That's not healthy preaching, and it doesn't make for healthy congregations.⁹¹

DeYoung is right. If the church is healthy, pastors will often say things like, "You are faithful and obedient to the Lord in this area; you excel in this grace, so keep it up." A lot of biblical instruction in our churches should have the gracious flavor of, "Just as you are doing, . . . do so more and more" (1 Thess. 4:1). "Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more . . ." (1 Thess. 4:9–10).

Paul often expresses confidence that churches are obeying and pleasing the Lord: "And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we

90. For a sample of Sibbes quotes from *The Bruised Reed*, see the Appendix.

91. Kevin DeYoung, *Impossible Christianity: Why Following Jesus Does Not Mean You Have to Change the World, Be an Expert in Everything, Accept Spiritual Failure, and Feel Miserable Pretty Much All the Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 55.

command” (2 Thess. 3:4). In Philippi, he calls attention to their constant obedience to God when he writes, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now . . .” (Phil. 2:12). Pastors today have much to learn from Paul’s example.

Here is sound leadership advice from Mark Dever:

So many times I’ve seen men, particularly younger guys, act as if real leadership is shown in correcting others. That’s why young men’s sermons often scold. What they haven’t figured out is that you can often accomplish more by encouragement. There are times to scold. But 80 to 90 percent of what you hope to correct can be accomplished through encouragement. If you look back at your life and consider who influenced you the most, you will probably find that it’s the people who believed in you.⁹²

Encouraging Your Pastors

Not only should shepherds encourage the flock, but the flock should encourage the shepherds. The pastor-congregation relationship should be marked by the joy of mutual encouragement.

1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 says, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” Hebrews 13 calls us to remember our leaders and imitate their faith (v. 7), and to follow their leadership (v. 17).

92. Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 101.

I am not making this point because I am a pastor seeking more encouragement. I too have pastors, and I desire to be an encouragement to them.

Here are a few ways you can consider encouraging your pastors:

- Pray for them and let them know you pray for them. Include thanksgiving for the pastors and the church in your prayers.
- Tell them the difference a sermon or their pastoral care has made in your life. Consider putting encouragement in writing, so it can be preserved and accessed in the future.
- Speak highly of them to others. I try to let people know the specific reasons my pastors are a gift from God to me.
- Share stories with them and with others of how God is at work in the church.
- Extend grace toward their weaknesses. We all have them, and some of us have many of them.
- When you have a helpful criticism, concern, or a thought for how the church or the pastors can improve, share it in person. This is preferable to a critical email or an anonymous message with cut-out letters that looks like a ransom note.
- Be an active church member, participating in meetings, using your gifts, maintaining unity, and devoting yourself to godliness.
- Joyfully follow their leadership. Be shaped by their pastoral leadership more than you are shaped by worldly voices.

Home Sweet Home

The home is the starting point for a culture of encouragement. A lack of affirmation in the home exasperates children, discourages spouses, and sucks the joy out of family relationships. It is imperative that fathers in particular cultivate a vision for a marriage and family that is built on encouragement.

For those who are married, the most important recipient of your encouragement is your spouse. Some parents lavish praise on their kids but overlook commending their spouse. It is rare that a marriage abounding in encouragement will be marked by bitterness, jealousy, distance, and disorder. Many marriages have been weakened if not altogether ruined for lack of seeing and enjoying the good in each other. Encouragement guards a marriage and fills it with joy. It is a happy thing to be seen and appreciated for our strengths, and to have a lifelong companion to help us see where God is at work in us.

Too often we lose sight of what God has done, is doing, and will do in the person he has joined us to. Tim Keller gives a beautiful description of marriage:

Within the Christian vision for marriage, here's what it means to fall in love. It is to look at another person and get a glimpse of the person God is creating, and to say, "I see who God is making you, and it excites me! I want to be part of that. I want to partner with you and God in the journey you are taking to his throne. And when we get there, I will look at your magnificence and say, 'I always knew you could be like this. I got glimpses of it on earth,

but now look at you!⁹³

That is our future in Christ. Never forget what your spouse will one day be. View each other and speak to each other accordingly.

Parents need to think about how to create a culture of encouragement in the home. Without this intentionality, the necessary corrections and inevitable conflicts of life will take over.

Seeing grace in our kids begins at a young age. Even if we cannot point out evidences of saving grace in our children, we can point out evidences of common grace. We can share the things we appreciate about our kids. We can let them know that their strengths loom large in our minds. We can enjoy them, laugh with them, hold them close, and cheer them on.

Celebrate each others accomplishments. Highlight the unique strengths of each family member. Take time on a child's birthday to have others share a good memory of them, something they like about them, or a strength of theirs.

It's good to affirm a nice baseball swing or a skilled piano performance, and we should never minimize the importance of being our kids' biggest fans in their activities. At the same time, parents should especially affirm character, conversion to Christ, baptism, and growth in godliness.

Encourage kids when they are difficult to love. Take care that a child is not the recipient of constant correction and minimal commendation. The more distant you are relationally

93. Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2011), 133.

from a child, the more identifying grace needs to be an intentional priority. The more aware you are of areas that need to change in that child, the more aggressive you need to be in seeing grace.

Our words create culture in the home. Let honor abound. Let grace be commended. Rejoice in what is good.

Men have the God-given privilege and responsibility of leading the way in this. The wise father will point out the hidden and often-unappreciated labors of a mother, calling children's attention to the blessing God has given them in this remarkable woman. "Here is what you guys need to understand about the gift you and I have in your mother."

The priority of encouragement makes a difference at the dinner table, on date night, and in the face of each other's sin. By the grace of God, resolve to make the home a place of encouragement.

The Ministry of Showing Up

The encouragement we need comes from God alone, but God normally uses means. There are many means of encouragement, but the greatest is when we gather on the Lord's Day—the most important and joy-filled day of the week—to sing, pray, and hear God's word. Hebrews 10:24–25 exhorts us, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

We all need the encouragement that comes from physically gathering with God's people. Someone once said that watching church on livestream is like watching a fireplace

on a screen—you can see it, but you can't feel the warmth. To feel the warmth, to be edified and to edify others as God intends, we must gather in person.

This is not only so we can be encouraged, but so we can encourage others through our presence. Tony Payne says,

One of the most important acts of love and encouragement we can all engage in is the powerful encouragement of just being there—because every time I walk into church, I am wearing a metaphorical t-shirt that says “God is important to me, and you are important to me.” And on the back it says, “And that’s why I wouldn’t dream of missing this.”⁹⁴

If you want to be encouraged and be used to encourage others, practice the ministry of showing up. Come early (or at least on time), sing loudly, listen attentively, and fellowship eagerly. Show up even when it’s difficult and it means saying no to other good things. Encourage others by being there.

A Refreshing Presence

Paul writes to Philemon and says, “For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you” (Philem. 1:7).

The goal of this book is for more Christians to live and speak in such a way that the commendation of Philemon 1:7 can be spoken over them: “. . . the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”

94. Tony Payne, *How to Walk into Church* (Matthias Media, 2015), 37.

What makes a person a refreshing presence? They are good listeners. They enter into the world of those who are struggling, with love and prayer. Sometimes the mere presence of a friend can be of a great encouragement.

If you want to refresh the hearts of many, learn to enjoy many different types of people. Appreciate a wide range of personalities and gift sets: extroverts and introverts, the curious and the cautious, the steady and the emotional.

Those who refresh others make great friends. They bring out the best in people. They motivate others to press on, they love speaking about Christ and his truth, and because they are skilled at seeing what is excellent and praiseworthy, they are enjoyable to be around.

Doers of the Word

Encouragement is not a suggestion, it's a command: "Encourage one another and build one another up" (1 Thess. 5:11). God wants us to put encouragement into action, being "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22). God is eager to use you to give strength to others. How can we be doers of the Word in encouragement?

Remember:

*True encouragement requires
eyes that see grace in others,
a heart that responds with gladness, and
words that promote continued faithfulness.*

C. J. Mahaney writes,

Since Scripture informs us that God is at work in every

soul that has been truly regenerated, we have this joy of bringing to the attention of every Christian in our relational world how we perceive God to be at work in their lives.⁹⁵

Be intentional about encouragement. Start with your friends and family members. Keep an eye out for the fruit of the Spirit—where do you see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? (Gal. 5:22–23) Look for the talents and spiritual gifts God has given others: faith, mercy, teaching, prophecy, service, leading, administrating, healing, giving, and more. Consider writing a letter or sending an email or text message with encouragement.

Prioritize encouragement in fellowship. Small group discussions should not center on sin, even though we will confess our sins to each other, but on encouragement.

Get in the habit of saying things like this to others:

- “I want to share with you one of the particular ways you are a blessing to me.”
- “Here are some of the ways I see God’s grace in your life and character.”
- “I am amazed that you are so steadfast and joyful in the midst of suffering. I can see God strengthening and helping you.”
- “God has given you a remarkable gift, and I’m excited to see how God uses it in the future.”
- “I’ve been praying for you, and I wanted to share what I have been praying.”

95. Mahaney, *Humility*, 114–115.

- “God laid a Scripture on my heart for you, and I think I’m supposed to share it with you.”

A Happy Work

Encouragement is a happy work—we get to spread joy by seeing God’s activity in others, refreshing the hearts of those around us, and speaking words that give grace. The Lord loves to direct the hearts of his people to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ (2 Thess. 3:5), and he uses us to do it.

So, do your part to make the culture in your church a culture of encouragement. The days may grow darker, but the church will shine as a community of grace and peace, and we will encourage each other every day until the Lord returns or calls us home.

May the Lord open our eyes to see more of his grace, open our hearts to celebrate his activity with gladness, and open our mouths to speak words that build up and give grace to those who hear. May the Lord use you as he used Barnabas, to spread encouragement to many.

May the church be filled with unity and love. May friendship run deep, fellowship be rich, and relationships be refreshing. “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5–6).

We are the people of Christ, the Barnabases of the world, the sons and daughters of encouragement.

Appendix

The Sweet Dropper

“The Sweet Dropper” is not a hip-hop name but a Puritan one. The sermons of the Puritan Richard Sibbes were so deeply encouraging that this is what they called him—“the Sweet Dropper.” They also called him “The Heavenly Doctor Sibbes.”

Sibbes was always dispensing comforting truths from God’s word and was unusually skilled in drawing consolation from the gospel. His book *The Bruised Reed* is full of the encouragement that comes from Christ.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said,

I shall never cease to be grateful to . . . Richard Sibbes who was balm to my soul at a period in my life when I was overworked and badly overtired, and therefore subject in an unusual manner to the onslaughts of the devil. In that state and condition . . . what you need is some gentle

tender treatment for your soul. I found at that time that Richard Sibbes, who was known in London in the early seventeenth century as ‘The Heavenly Doctor Sibbes’ was an unfailing remedy. *The Bruised Reed* quietened, soothed, comforted, encouraged and healed me.⁹⁶

The Bruised Reed was first published in 1630, toward the end of Sibbes’ life. Sibbes taught that Christians need to know how to “make comfortable use of the gospel.” His goal in writing the book is that Christians would “not lose any portion of comfort that is laid up for us in Christ.”⁹⁷

It’s a book that I’ve read a number of times. For your encouragement, here are some favorite quotes. I’ve updated a few words that were in Old English.

1. “There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us.”⁹⁸
2. “For . . . our encouragement . . . let all know that none are fitter for comfort than those that think themselves furthest off.”⁹⁹
3. “The church of Christ is a common hospital, wherein all are in some measure sick of some spiritual disease or other.”¹⁰⁰

96. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 175.

97. Sibbes, *The Works of Richard Sibbes, Volume 1*, 100.

98. *Ibid.*, 47.

99. *Ibid.*, 48.

100. *Ibid.*, 57.

4. "Take heed of false reasoning; as because our fire does not blaze out as others, therefore we have no fire at all; and by false conclusions come to sin against the commandment in bearing false witness against ourselves."¹⁰¹

5. "We should not avoid good actions for the infirmities cleaving unto them. Christ looks more at the good in them that he means to cherish, than the ill in them that he means to abolish."¹⁰²

6. "There is never a holy sigh, never a tear we shed, lost. . . . We should take heed of a spirit of discouragement in all . . . holy duties, since we have so gracious a Savior. Pray as we are able, hear as we are able, strive as we are able, do as we are able, according to the measure of grace received. God in Christ will cast a gracious eye upon that which is his own. . . . Let us not be cruel to ourselves when Christ is thus gracious."¹⁰³

7. "In Christ all perfections of mercy and love meet; how great then must that mercy be that lodges in so gracious a heart? . . . A father looks not so much at the blemishes of his child, as at his own nature in him; so Christ finds matter to love from that which is his own in us. He sees his own nature in us."¹⁰⁴

101. *Ibid.*, 58.

102. *Ibid.*, 65.

103. *Ibid.*, 66.

104. *Ibid.*, 71.

8. "He became not only a man, but a curse, a man of sorrows for us. He was broken, that we should not be broken; he was troubled, that we should not be desperately troubled; he became a curse, that we should not be accursed. Whatsoever may be wished for in an all-sufficient comforter, is all to be found in Christ."¹⁰⁵

9. "Remember, that the first and chief ground of our comfort is, that Christ as a priest offered himself as a sacrifice to his Father for us. The guilty soul flies first to Christ crucified, made a curse for us. . . . And when we feel ourselves cold in affection and duty, it is the best way to warm ourselves at this fire of his love and mercy in giving himself for us."¹⁰⁶

10. "What a comfort is this in our conflicts with our unruly hearts, that it will not always be thus! Let us strive a little while, and then we shall be happy for ever. Let us think when we are troubled with our sins that Christ has this in charge of his Father, 'that he shall not quench the smoking flax,' until he has subdued all. This puts a shield into our hands to beat back all 'the fiery darts of Satan' (Eph. 6:16). He [Satan] will object, 'You are a great sinner;' we may answer, 'Christ is a strong Savior.'"¹⁰⁷

105. *Ibid.*, 73.

106. *Ibid.*, 79.

107. *Ibid.*, 98.



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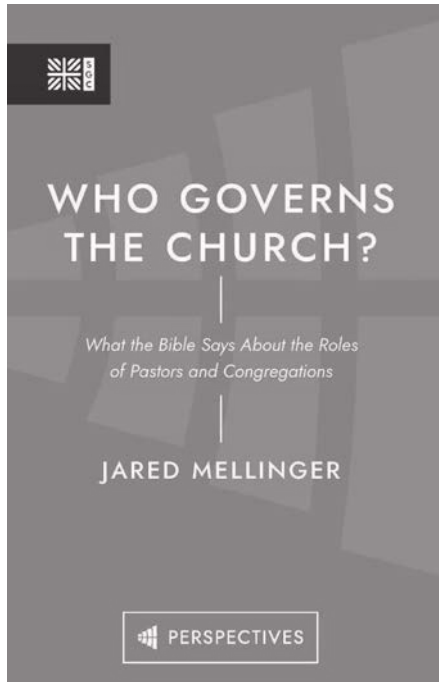
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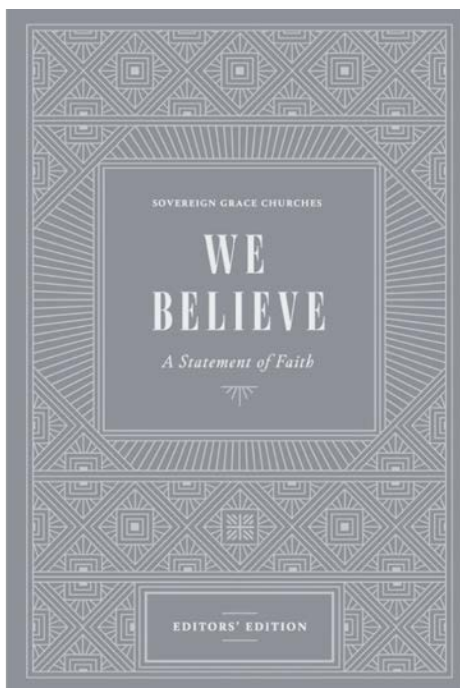
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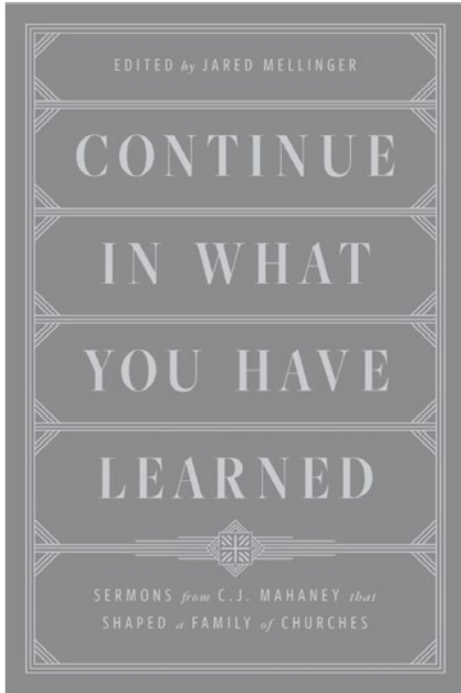
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