

Be An Encourager

Romans 15:1-4

Intro

Rev. Donn Moomaw was once Ron Regan's pastor at Bel Air Presbyterian Church in California. One Sunday when he was preaching a lady came up to him after a sermon and said, "Oh, Reverend Moomaw, I just have to tell you that every sermon you preach is better than your next." He thanked her and then went home and began to think it over. Now that is the compliment that a pessimist can give. If you're a pessimist and you want to give a pessimist compliment, that is one. "Every sermon you preach is better than your next." (Source: Earl Palmer, "A Durable Hope," Preaching Today)

That's discouraging for a pastor. Discouragement is like a thief. It steals your vitality, your zeal, your joy, your peace, and your contentment. If discouragement dwells long enough with you, its friends will soon join. Their names are hopelessness, despair, depression, doubt, and bitterness. Sometimes, discouragement can be so strong that you even don't want to go on living.

In psychology we use to have an expression and it was called "an invitation to live and an invitation to die." Basically when you mistreated someone or said bad things about the person, you were inviting them to die. But when you were kind and said encouraging words to someone then you were inviting them to live.

Today I want to invite you to live as we look at being an encourager. We going to focus on the passage found in Romans 15:1-4.

Romans 15

Through chapters 14 and 15 of Romans the Apostle Paul emphasizes major principles that govern the relationship of strong and weak Christians. One of those principles is: pleasing one another with Christ as our example.

If everyone aims only to please himself or herself, we will have problems. It is incumbent on strong believers to serve the weak.

The beginning of chapter 15 deals with encouraging one another and building them up in their faith.

What is 'encouragement' exactly?

Is it helping a sad person feel happier? Is it helping a happy person stay that way? It's more than that. Encouragement is the power to build and change lives.

Encouragement is not only central to church life and ministry, but it also belongs to one of the most powerful themes in the whole of scripture: *the power to change lives*.

That powerful word not only changes us as we hear and respond to it; but through us it changes others too.

The New Testament Greek word is **parakaleo**, which literally means "*to come alongside*." It presumes that the person is under pressure (fearful, weak, overwhelmed), and it means to strengthen by giving appropriate aid and support.

Biblical encouragement presumes that Christians live under intense pressure—not just the normal pressures of everyday life in a broken world, but also the pressures of serving Christ in a spiritually hostile environment—and therefore believers need to be spiritually strengthened on a regular basis.

Verse 1 “*We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*”

“*We who are strong.*” They are those who are walking in the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, and manifesting the fruit of the Spirit and who, by virtue of their spiritual strength, are responsible for those who are weak.

Galatians 6:1, “*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.*”

Basically what Scripture is teaching here is that the spiritually and morally strong have a responsibility for the spiritually and morally weak.

The word “*ought*” in Romans 15:1 translated from the original language means “*to be a debtor.*” Paul uses the same word in Romans 1:14: “*I am debtor both to the Greeks and to the barbarians.*” *Our debt is “to bear the infirmities of the weak.”*

That word is used more than 25 times in the New Testament. It does not communicate the idea of tolerating someone's inadequacy; it refers to carrying someone's load - of shouldering someone's burden. Galatians 6:2 says, “*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*”

Here in Romans 15:1 Paul is urging the strong to come under the weak believer, to walk along with him or her until they can grow to become strong in the faith. We need to bear their weaknesses by coming alongside them and nurturing them in their walk with the Lord.

In Romans 13:8 Paul said, “*Owe no man any thing, but to love one another.*” That's a debt we'll never fully pay off; we'll always owe it.

Not a People Pleaser

Some people will think that this verse is saying we ought to be people pleasers. A people pleaser is one who adjusts the Gospel message to fit what people want, and backs away from dealing with the sin in a person's life. That's not what is meant here in Romans 15:1.

The Apostle Paul was not speaking of compromising the Gospel or godly standards of living in order to gain acceptance and approval by the world. Paul asked the Galatians “*Am I seeking the favour of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond servant of Christ*” (Gal. 1:10).

Paul is not telling us to please people by adjusting the gospel, ignoring sin, or attracting people to us for our own gain. He wants us to please those who need help in carrying the load of their spiritual frailties and failings.

Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians to “*encourage the faint-hearted*” (1 Thess. 5:14). The “faint-hearted” are those who are weak—those who have had their spiritual wind knocked out through adversity. Some of them had recently lost Christian family or friends. Paul urged them to encourage one another (1 Thess. 4:18).

Verse 2 “*Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up.*”

Everyone is obligated to please their neighbor with the goal of building them up. In Romans 14:19 Paul says, “*Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.*” Strong believers are responsible for the spiritual growth of the weak. That is not to say they should sacrifice God's truth for the sake of harmony, but they should set aside their liberty with regard to neutral things for the purpose of building up the weak.

In Philippians 2:1-3 Paul said, *“If there be, therefore, any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any tender mercies and compassions, fulfill my joy, that you be like-minded in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves.”*

What if a small group of people in our church began writing letters – one note once in awhile – saying, “I appreciate you,” and they sent them to others in our congregation? What kind of impact would that have on the morale of believers of our church?

Two Stories

1/ In a small country church a novice altar boy serving the priest at Sunday mass accidentally dropped the glass of wine. The priest struck the boy, knocking him to the ground. Standing over the young servant, the angry priest shouted, *“Get out and don't come back!”* That boy was marred for life and decided to reject the church and anything to do with God. That boy grew up to become Tito, the dictator and Communist leader of Yugoslavia.

2/ A baby boy was oxygen-deprived for 18 minutes after his birth and left to die on a table. Miraculously, he lived, though he became afflicted with cerebral palsy. He had to overcome even more obstacles when he was orphaned at 14 after the death of his parents. As he grew up he had a very difficult life in general. He became very depressed, went to school and everybody kept making fun of him because of his handicap. But he had one sister that encouraged him a lot. She persuaded him to go to church. He eventually did and gave his life to Christ. He now is one of the greatest motivational preachers. He has spoken to over 6,000 churches about his testimony and he is also a pastor of a church. His name David Ring.

Words have a powerful influence

Words can change the course of one's life -- diffusing anger and turning tragedy into triumph. Just as unkind words spoken over time can create sandpaper person (difficult person), kind words spoken over time can radically impact the hearts and lives of difficult people.

It is a paradox to me that those who most need encouragement and a cheerful word or two along the way are those who least deserve them – in our eyes.

The power of the spoken word is enormous. Sandpaper people are accustomed to being the target of harsh words. In fact, many of these difficult people delight in deliberately evoking strong words of criticism and condemnation in order to prove that what they really believe about themselves is true -- they are broken and need to be mended.

How you treat others has a powerful influence on their lives.

Nelson Mandela on the Power of Words

“It is never my custom to use words lightly. If 27 years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact on the way people live and die.” (Source Nelson Mandela, in *His Words*, Wall Street Journal, 12-5-13)

Paul instructs us to make this *“building up”* of others our goal.

When you know that someone believes in you, it brings out your best. Jesus did this with Peter. Peter's name – *“Petros”* – meant pebble. But Jesus said, “Pebble, you're going to be a rock. I'm giving you a new name.”

When Jesus said that to Peter, the apostle was anything but a rock. He was Mr. Impulsive, Mr. Foot-in-Mouth. But Jesus didn't tell him what he was - He told him what he could be. He gave him confidence to live up to his potential. We all need encouragement.

When you give encouragement, it needs to be genuine. So, give from the heart and with sincerity. Encouragement also needs to be regular – don't be stingy with your encouragement. And encouragement needs to be specific. Don't say, "I enjoyed the meal," rather say, "I can tell that you put a lot of effort into this meal and everything was perfect." Don't say, "You did a good job," rather say, "I noticed you handled that angry person with tact and you maintained your cool under pressure. Bravo!"

Life is tough, and there are enough discouraging people in the world. We need a whole band - an army - of encouragers! When a church encourages, it attracts people like a magnet.

Verse 3 ***"For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.""***

Christ did not please Himself; He took the reproach of God. Christ suffered. If He really wanted to please Himself, He would have remained in glory with the Father.

Christians are to conform to Christ. That means we seek to be like Him rather than make everyone be like us. And being like Him means we don't do what pleases us, but what pleases the Lord and others.

A willingness to please God in spite of the inevitable reproach is a key Christian attitude. Christ was willing to endure anything for the sake of doing the Father's will. His willingness to please the Father is our example.

Rather than trying to please ourselves, we should follow Christ's pattern and be willing to suffer anything in pleasing another. He set aside all His divine rights to be subject to the Father and suffer for the sake of sinners. Can we do less for a fellow Christian? In 1 John 2:6 says, *"He that says he abides in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked."*

Verse 4 ***"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."***

The phrase *"was written to teach us"* tells us that the Old Testament is not a dead book.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 we read, *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."*

The Scriptures instruct us on how we ought to live.

Our hope is based on what the Bible reveals. Would you have hope in the life to come if you'd never read Scripture? No. That's why Ephesians 2:12 says that those without the Scriptures were without hope and without God in the world. Without the Word of God we have no basis for hope. We wouldn't know about heaven, about Christ and His Kingdom, or about the glorious reward that lies ahead. That's a great encouragement!

Endurance comes from confidence in Scripture. The Bible tells us we have the power to patiently endure this life, waiting for the hope that awaits us. We could not endure our trials if we had no word from God about the security of the believer. But Scripture tells us to endure, to be strengthened, and to develop patience so we can be more useful to God and more effective in winning others (James 1:4). Now that's encouraging!

Encouragement

The Word of God not only tells us how to endure, but also encourages us in the process. We have hope, and that hope is anchored in the Word of God. We need to learn from Scripture. A biblical mindset is the key ingredient for the strong believer's attitude toward a weaker brother. One aspect of learning patience and encouragement is learning not only to tolerate but build up a weaker believer.

Conclusion

Being involved in pastoral ministry these some 37 years, I still encounter the walking wounded every day, people desperately in need of someone who cares, someone who believes in them even if they don't believe in themselves. We live in a broken world where people are gripped by pain, worry, fear, heartbreak, and where many feel lost. We as believers need to come along side the harassed and helpless (Matt. 9:36) and be an encouragement to them.

I pray that my words will be filled with the love and encouragement of the Lord when I meet with them, talk and counsel with them.

Everyone needs encouragement. Leaders, husbands, wives, children, moms and dads, fellow colleagues, friends and even pastors.

My personal experience in Ottawa one Sunday morning...

We, as the body of Christ, have an obligation to help the weak and to encourage and build them up.