

PARAMETERS OF ENCOURAGEMENT



ENCOURAGEMENT (3)

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Parameters of Encouragement

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *Parameters of Encouragement*

The Holy Spirit is at work within every believer to give us the courage to serve God exceedingly abundantly beyond all we've ever dared to ask or think. He uses us to encourage one another, so that we might become more the people God has saved us to be.

Naturally, therefore, we would expect God's courage to come to us for specific works and ends in line with His overall plan for the world. Our own work of encouraging others will be more effective and fruitful if we can keep those divine parameters in mind.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

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May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Glory of God

... walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. 1 Thessalonians 2.12

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10.31

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5.16

The value of encouragement

Thus far in our study of encouragement, we’ve seen some persuasive examples of why encouragement is so important. When Jesus encouraged people, they became literally different people, emboldened in one way or another to do what was right and honoring to God. So also when Barnabas encouraged Paul, leading to his becoming a powerful and fruitful servant in the Lord’s household.

Paul’s encouragement to the Corinthians and Thessalonians, and their encouragement back to him, also served to further the cause of Christ and the Gospel in those early days of the Christian movement. It’s clear that encouragement is a very important discipline to practice, because by it, good things happen to bring the grace of God to bear on other people. And when that happens, thanks and praise to God increase, and His glory abounds (2 Cor. 4.15).

Encouragement is ultimately a work of the Holy Spirit, Who is the great Encourager and dwells in the soul of every believer. He is pleased to do His work of encouragement by engaging us. The Spirit works with the Word of God to stir in our souls, so that we begin to desire more of what the Lord desires of and for us. That stirring can become a lightning bolt of holy spiritual energy in us as others encourage us in the ways of the Lord. By their words, examples, and assistance, we experience the Spirit of God stretching out within us, changing us in our soul and transforming us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, so that we live more boldly and consistently as His disciples and witnesses. And the same can happen when we encourage others.

The writer of the book of Hebrews considered encouragement so important that he instructed his readers to *consider* – to think about, plan, and prepare – how to stimulate their fellow believers to love and good works (Heb. 10.24). Encouragement is something we all can and must do, for the edification of our fellow believers and the progress of the Kingdom of God.

But encouragement is effective for the cause of Christ only when it is offered within certain parameters. We may not encourage one another to do just anything – whatever may be on our heart or in our mind. That bolt of holy spiritual energy, that moves us to courageous action for the Lord, only strikes positively when we keep in mind the parameters of its power.

And the first of these parameters is the glory of God.

Glory

The glory of God is something every believer talks about. We sing about God’s glory: “To God be the glory, great things He has done...” We pray that God will get glory: “For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever...” We even remark on this or that experience of God’s glory: “Wasn’t worship *glorious* today?”

But do we really understand what we’re talking about? The glory of God is the end every Christian should be seeking in every area, facet, activity, and moment of life. All our works should be directed toward bringing glory to God. God has called us to His glory, and if that’s anything like being called to someone’s office or

home, it becomes not just something to talk about, but an immersive experience.

But what is the glory of God?

The word *glory* carries the idea of weight. The Hebrew verb from which “glory” derives means literally, to be heavy, or weighty. We see Paul punning on this idea in 2 Corinthians 6.17: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory...” A *weight* of glory. What can that mean?

C. S. Lewis was persuaded that most believers do not understand the greatness of the glory of God. We’re too easily satisfied with trivial things. He wrote in *The Weight of Glory*, “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” He continued, “The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses...shall find approval, shall please God.”

Lewis went on to explain that glory means being in the very Presence of God, *experiencing* His grandeur and beauty, His holiness, majesty, and might – His *weight*. And then this: “We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.”

The glory of God is the *experience* of God – knowing God present in, with, through, for, and by us, so that His Presence is manifest in even the humblest, most ordinary things we do every day. Lewis concluded, “When human souls have become as perfect in voluntary obedience as the inanimate creation is in its lifeless obedience, then they will put on its glory, or rather that greater glory of which Nature is only the first sketch.”

True encouragement

We only truly encourage one another when the goal of our encouragement is the glory of God – to show forth the beauty of God; to manifest His holiness, power, goodness, love, and joy; to refract the indwelling Presence of God in works of obedience that stretch us beyond ourselves into new regions and reflections of Christlikeness.

We need one another to know the glory of God with any consistency. Lewis wrote, “All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.” When this is our aim, when we will be satisfied with nothing less than that God should be put on display and glorified, then we may encourage and be encouraged unto the hope of glory, in which we as believers continually stand (Rom. 5.1, 2).

Pray to know God in His glory, to experience His glory in His Word and world, and to encourage His children to live courageously for His glory in everything they do.

For reflection

1. When do you experience the glory of God?
2. Why do you suppose the glory of God eludes so many believers?
3. Why must we only practice the discipline of encouragement toward the end of God’s glory?

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Next steps – Preparation: Pray that God will make you aware of His Presence throughout the day, and will bring you into His glory.

2 The Kingdom of God

...walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. 1 Thessalonians 2.12

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” Matthew 6.33

A calling from God

Let’s imagine a scenario. The phone rings at your home, and someone other than you answers. But the call is for you, so the person who answered finds you and says, “It’s for you.” You reply, “Who is it?”, that is, “Who’s calling?” Let’s say it’s your boss. Your boss wants you to do something right away. Your boss has called you *specifically* for this task. It’s up your alley, in your wheelhouse, and right there on your job description. And it needs to be done *now*.

How do you respond?

Now let’s do a reality check. God is calling. God is calling *you*. He is calling you to live for His glory, and we have considered what that entails – every aspect of your life daily devoted to Him to establish and declare His Presence in all you do.

But God is also calling you to *His Kingdom*. And God’s own Son has reinforced that calling by emphasizing the urgency of it: You must seek God’s Kingdom *first* in everything you do. If you heed that part of God’s calling, He will add to your life everything else you may require. You will know full and abundant life as it is offered in Jesus Christ (Jn. 10.10; 14.6).

God is calling you to His Kingdom and glory as the defining motif, organizing principle, driving force, and primary outcome of everything you do in life. And He’s calling you *now* and *always*, not merely for some far distant time when Jesus returns in glory.

How do you respond?

The Kingdom of God

Once, when I was a very young child, I was staying with my cousins in another part of our town. My aunt sent me to the kitchen to bring her the teapot. I immediately got up and went to the kitchen, where I realized I didn’t know what a teapot was. My parents didn’t drink tea. I’d never heard the word “teapot” before my aunt sent me to fetch it. So I looked around in the kitchen for likely candidates to fulfill the mission with which I’d been charged.

I brought her a mason jar, which I found on a counter.

Needless to say, my cousins had a great laugh. The point is obvious: If you don’t know what you’ve been sent to seek, you could end up a little embarrassed.

More to the point of our concern, if you don’t know what you’re supposed to be seeking as the *primary and overarching and defining aspect* of your life, you could miss out on what you’ve been called to in life. If the Kingdom of God is nothing more than an idea or a term to you, and not a reality you can see with your mind, long for in your heart, know as the default value of your conscience, and realize increasingly in every aspect of your life, you’re going to have difficulty fulfilling your calling.

The Kingdom of God is nothing other than the rule of King Jesus, His authoritative governance according to

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the Word of God. Jesus is now exalted as King of kings and Lord of lords. His Kingdom extends to every place, everyone, and everything. He is Lord and King of all. His rule extends throughout all of creation, the entire cosmos and everything in it. He upholds the cosmos by His Word of power (Heb. 1.3). He rules for uprightness and goodness (Ps. 45.6), to restore all of creation – which He reconciled to His Father by His death and resurrection (2 Cor. 5.19) – to that “very good” condition in which it was first created (Gen. 1.31). Jesus came to earth, as He Himself explained, to “bring near” the Kingdom of God, to begin preparing the soil of the creation for the actual sowing of the Kingdom that would come with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost (Matt. 4.17; Acts 2.14-36). Seated at the right hand of God the Father, Jesus has received the Kingdom of God: “Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom *the one* which shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7.13 14).

And Jesus has given that Kingdom to His saints – to all who believe in Him (Dan. 7.18) – that they might seek it, in line with God’s calling, as the defining objective of everything they do in life.

The character of the Kingdom

Paul explained that the Kingdom of God is not just a phrase or idea we as believers bandy about as something yet to be realized. He said the Kingdom of God is *power* (1 Cor. 4.20), *Holy Spirit* power (Acts 1.8) which aims to realize more righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit in every facet of our lives (Rom. 14.17, 18). The Holy Spirit, Who dwells within us, uses the Word of God to stir our souls to *understand* these virtues, to *desire* them above all else, and to *pursue and practice* them in all the details of our lives.

We can encourage one another to a greater realization of the rule of King Jesus in our lives. Through our prayers, example, words, and help, we can bring the stirring of God’s Spirit to vital spiritual energy in one another’s lives for the courage to seek and advance the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6.10).

Where the Kingdom of God is present, righteousness, peace, and joy abound. Beauty, goodness, and truth provide the fragrance of life in Christ (2 Cor. 2.15). The fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5.22, 23), the tokens of love (1 Cor. 13.4-7), and the benchmarks of holiness (1 Jn. 5.1-3; Rom. 7.12) blossom and come to fruition increasingly in everything we do. It takes courage to live a Kingdom-seeking life, and God can give us the courage we need to step out in faith, stand against cultural trends, and transform our personal spheres into signs and outposts of the Kingdom of God.

The more we encourage one another in our calling to seek first the Kingdom of God, the more of that Kingdom we may expect to see, coming on earth as it is in heaven.

For reflection

1. Why do we say that the Kingdom of God is a reality *now*?
2. What does it mean to seek the Kingdom *first* in everything we do?
3. How should seeking the Kingdom affect the kind of encouragement we seek or give?

Next Step – Transformation: Ask God to lead you in seeking His Kingdom today, so that, by the end of the day, you can look back with thanksgiving and praise at the progress He has made in and through you.

3 The Word of God

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. 1 Corinthians 4.6

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. Revelation 22.18, 19

Every good idea?

Perhaps we all would like to help our fellow believers feel better about themselves and their walk with the Lord. At any rate, we should, because we are members together of the Body of Christ, and we are called to encourage one another to a richer, fuller, and more fruitful experience of our Lord Jesus.

True encouragement is the work of the Holy Spirit. Naturally, therefore, we should only expect Him to encourage us, and to use us to encourage others, within certain parameters consistent with His character and calling. We have already considered two such parameters: The glory of God and the Kingdom of God. All true encouragement will aim at these objectives, to know God's glory and show it in all we do, and to further the rule of King Jesus unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

We may not feel competent to encourage our fellow believers toward a more consistent realization of these goals. And, in a certain sense, we aren't. But we are commanded, over and over, to encourage one another; and we are promised that we can do whatever God calls us to do. So it must be that the Holy Spirit can work in us in such a way as to enable us to connect with fellow believers such that a spiritual charge of encouragement occurs, empowering them to more courageous actions for the Lord Jesus.

God has given us His Word as living and active power to aid us in encouraging others (Heb. 4.12). The Holy Spirit uses the Word to bring us into the Presence of God and His glory and to outfit us for every good work (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 2 Tim. 3.15-17). Do we experience Him encouraging us in this way? Do we see Jesus and His glory in God's Word? Are we daily challenged, directed, and empowered for every good work?

And are we effective in wielding the Word of God in such a way as to fight off discouraging spiritual elements and build others up in the Lord (Eph. 6.17; 1 Thess. 4.18; Eph. 4.29)?

The call to encouragement means we share in the responsibility for helping our fellow believers increase in Jesus and His Kingdom. The Word of God is our handbook for encouragement, but we need to make sure we're prepared and using it as God intends.

Prepare yourself

How do you read the Bible? Put another way, what are you reading the Bible *for*? What do you hope to gain, or realize, or achieve from your reading?

You may be looking for more understanding of God's will. That's a good thing to seek. Perhaps your interest is in finding some word of comfort during an anxious period. Keep reading; it's in there.

Some people may read the Bible merely to check it off some to-do list for the day. That's OK, too, although that's not nearly enough. Or you might be reading to prepare for some class or Bible study group – you don't want to look dumb in front of your friends. Well, that's a good reason to read the Bible as well.

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By all means, read the Bible for all these reasons. But above all, read the Bible for the reason He Who gave the Bible gave it: Read it to see Jesus (Jn. 5.39), and in seeing Jesus, to gain the *courage* God's Encourager wants you to have to live more fully for Him in every facet of your life.

Do you ever read the Bible for *courage*? That is, to let the words of Scripture so illuminate and expand your mind, inflame your heart, and bore into your conscience that you feel like you just have to do something like you've never done before? Something beyond your present experience? More than what you've ever imagined? More even than you think yourself capable of taking on?

If you're reading that way, you're reading expectantly, believing God to do something in you that transforms you, be it ever so slightly, more fully into the image of Jesus, and that launches you out into your daily mission field with new confidence, new plans, and new spiritual conviction. You're reading, in other words, for *courage*. You want God to deliver on His promises that you can become more like Jesus, you can be more faithful and consistent as His witness, you can put your old self aside and serve others in love, you can die to your ego and fears and live selflessly for Jesus, even if it entails some form of sacrifice or suffering.

Read the Bible for *courage*. Plead with the Lord to *encourage you!* And don't stop wrestling with His Word until He blesses you with the courage you seek.

See Jesus

Read the Bible to see Jesus. See Him throughout the course of His earthly ministry – His selflessness, compassion, boundless energy for serving. See Him teaching about the Kingdom of God. See Him shaping His disciples. See Him casting out demons, healing the lame and sick, standing up to false teachers and egomaniacal religious leaders. Hear Him explaining the mysteries of creation in terms of His Kingdom and salvation. See Jesus suffering for our sins and trusting God completely as He does.

Then see Him in glory – served by multitudes of angels, adored by innumerable departed saints, putting His enemies under His feet, upholding the universe and everything in it by His Word of power. See Him radiant in glory, matchless in beauty, shedding the light of life on everything and everyone as He works to prepare a place for us with Him forever.

Set your mind on the things that are above, where Christ is seated in heavenly places (Col. 3.1-3). Let the awesomeness, majesty, brilliance, power, and *closeness* of His Presence fill you with the conviction that you can become more like Him, you can fulfill your calling as His witness, you can love your neighbor more consistently, and you can do exceedingly abundantly beyond anything you've ever asked or dreamt before.

Commit yourself for the day ahead to take a single, specific step of *courage* so that Jesus stretches out in you, makes Himself known through you, and furthers His influence and reign on earth by what He leads you to do.

Then, throughout the day, look for other believers to encourage with the courage the Holy Spirit has given you by your vision of Jesus and your engagement with Him in His glorious Word.

For reflection

1. What does it mean to read the Bible for courage?
2. Why is having a clear, compelling, and growing vision of Jesus so important to having the courage to follow Him?
3. Who are the people you would be most likely to encourage by the courage Jesus gives you from His Word?

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Next steps – Transformation: What new step of courage will you take today? Whom will you encourage?

4 Christlikeness

Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. 2 Corinthians 3.17, 18

Discipleship

A misguided notion exists in many churches today which is unspoken, but nonetheless real. It's the idea that "discipleship" is a level of faith that's not intended for all who believe in Jesus. We don't teach this so much as suggest and tolerate it. When we offer "discipleship" classes as an option for church members, we implicitly communicate that such training is not for every believer. Accordingly, most people don't sign up. They are content, for one reason or another, with being "Christians" and with not having to go on to become "disciples".

Most believers appear to be of the opinion that "discipleship" is not something they need, or are ready for, or have the time or inclination to pursue. They believe in Jesus, have joined the church, and try to be faithful in attendance, giving, and perhaps some additional form of participation in the community of faith.

But "discipleship" sounds to many believers like preparation for the ministry, or for going out to the mission field, or at least, for some leadership role in the local church.

And of what do such "discipleship" courses typically consist? A section on spiritual growth – prayer, Bible reading and study, confession of sin, and so forth. Then perhaps a unit on sharing your faith – getting your testimony together, learning a Gospel presentation. And finally, some guidance in discipling others, anchored in 2 Timothy 2.2, and which frequently entails enlisting new people for the "discipleship" program.

All that is certainly valid and necessary. We should add much more to such a curriculum, of course, but as a foundation for discipleship, training organized around those foci is not a bad start.

But shouldn't *every* believer be grounded in such disciplines? Aren't we *all* called, as believers in and followers of Jesus Christ, to be disciples?

To the extent that we perpetuate this misguided understanding of discipleship, we are undermining the Lord's work of building His Church and furthering His rule on earth as it is in heaven. We are inviting people who have been called to be disciples to tailor their practice of faith to their own interests, tastes, and convenience, rather than to the terms Jesus Himself outlined.

At the same time, we have made of "discipleship" a kind of elite corps of the duly-but-minimally-trained, whose primary attainment becomes making more "disciples" like themselves – recruiting more people into the program.

Fear of discipleship?

Christians are those who believe in Jesus for salvation. And every Christian is a disciple of Jesus Christ – a follower, learner, and servant of the King of kings and Lord of lords, Who gave Himself for our sins, that He might renew and restore us in every aspect and facet of our lives.

Yet we have become comfortable in our false notion of discipleship, and we are fearful of aspiring to anything more. Pastors are fearful of "pushing" people, lest they leave and go somewhere else. The people are fearful they may have to give up things they consider to be very important in order to move from being a

Christian to being a disciple.

If we're ever going to get on with the work of being and making disciples, we'll need a fresh and continuous shot of Holy Spirit courage, empowering us to embrace a new understanding of discipleship and to submit to the ongoing process of growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Learning and putting on Jesus

Two ideas from the apostle Paul can help us in gaining a better understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 4.17-24 Paul addressed the saints and disciples at Ephesus about the need to continue growing in the Lord. He said that they were to "learn Jesus" as the defining mark of their commitment to Christ. They were not merely to *believe* in Jesus, nor simply to *learn about* Jesus. True disciples *learn Jesus* so thoroughly and continuously, that He overcomes everything in them that is reminiscent of their lives – believing dumb ideas, living distant from God, abiding in ignorance about spiritual matters, living like worldly people rather than saints, hardening their hearts toward others, and living unclean, greedy, self-serving lives. Jesus calls us to *learn Him* so that He can help us to *unlearn* all those ways that are contrary to our calling as His disciples.

In Romans 13.14 Paul describes this process of learning Jesus as "putting on" the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as you get dressed every day, putting off your PJs and putting on the clothes the day requires, so each day we must put off anything that keeps us tied to the world of mere self, things, and folly, and to put on the Lord Jesus Christ in heart, mind, conscience, words, and deeds.

This is what identifies us as disciples. And if we're going to do this consistently and fruitfully, if we're going to have the courage we need every day to deny and crucify our old sinful selves and increase in the likeness of Jesus, we'll need to be encouraged by the words, examples, and help we receive from our fellow believers in the Lord.

And they will need to be encouraged in this by us.

The Encourager's work

This is the Holy Spirit's work in the life of every disciple of Jesus Christ. As Paul explained, the Spirit is working to transform us into the likeness of Jesus. He wants Christ to increase in us and our old self to decrease (Jn. 3.30). As we come to the Word of God day by day, looking for Jesus, waiting and meditating for the Spirit to show us the glory of God in the face of Jesus in that Word, the Spirit is at work within us, willing and doing according to God's good pleasure (Phil. 2.13). God's pleasure is that we should *see Jesus* in His Word. Seeing Jesus in every page and passage of Scripture brings us into the Presence of God and His glory. As we are exposed to the glory of God, we are changed – even if only ever so slightly – and begin to take on more of the character of Jesus. We start to think more clearly with the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16). We embrace the affections and desires of Jesus, as the Spirit teaches us (Ezek. 36.26, 27). Our conscience is firmed up in Jesus, so that pressing on in Him becomes the priority in everything we do (Phil. 3.12-14).

As this happens, we begin to envision words we can speak and things we can do to declare and show Jesus to the people around us. We'll need the courage only God can give us thus to live as witnesses for Christ. And if we have friends who share our commitment to following Jesus, with whom we pray and are growing in the Lord, the Holy Spirit can use us to encourage one another for those next steps of faith that will find Jesus being formed more perfectly in us day by day.

Discipleship is an active, growing, learning, and ministering way of life. It is not an option. If you don't want to be a disciple, ask yourself why. If you do, look to the Lord, and find a few friends who will join you in your commitment and will encourage you – and whom you can encourage – to press on toward Christ and to follow Him in every facet of your daily life.

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For reflection

1. Why is every believer a disciple of Jesus? What does this imply about our individual discipleship?
2. What does it mean to “learn Jesus”? To “put on” the Lord Jesus Christ”?
3. How should you expect the Holy Spirit to use you in encouraging your fellow disciples?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with another Christian today about how you hope to grow in your calling as a disciple. Is your friend willing to join you as a prayer partner and mutual encourager?

5 Our Heavenly Calling

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus...exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end... Hebrews 3.1, 13, 14

Lest

Here again we meet a simple instruction that is mostly ignored by most of us as disciples of Christ: "exhort one another". As you might suppose, the Greek word is actually "encourage." We live in the day of salvation, the day when the Gospel is going out over all the world, and those whose hearts God is opening are believing in Jesus and entering into God's rest (Heb. 3.7-11). And in this day, we who believe are called to encourage one another daily, while the work of salvation is going forward.

Encouraging and being encouraged should be one of the most identifiable aspects of our discipleship as followers of Jesus Christ.

Because it's dangerous *not* to be encouraged: "but *encourage* one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' *lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*" (emphasis added).

Put another way, if we're not being encouraged to follow Jesus, to seek His Kingdom and righteousness, and to live for His glory, we are in danger of being deceived by sin and becoming hardened in our heart to God. And every believer we fail to encourage is in similar danger. Encouragement is crucial to fulfilling our calling as disciples unto the Kingdom and glory of God.

Why? Because the days are evil, Paul reminds us (Eph. 5.15-17). Spiritual forces of evil in high places don't want us to be courageous followers of Jesus Christ. They are working to make us *complacent*, not *courageous*. And they are always on the job. Every ounce of energy, every thought or affection, every next step that is not consciously devoted to our Kingdom-and-glory calling in Jesus Christ runs the risk of being lost to spiritual forces of wickedness and evil, which are capable of many forms of deception. And each time we allow ourselves to become deceived, we add fresh bricks and mortar to the rebuilding of our hard hearts.

Encouragement is the antidote to complacency, deceitfulness, and hardness of heart. Be sure you get some daily. And be sure you give some daily as well.

In this together

Because as disciples of Jesus Christ, Kingdom-seekers and glory-getters, we are in this together. We are "partakers", the writer of Hebrews tells us, of a common calling and life. We are partners, co-laborers, teammates, and brethren in a "heavenly calling" which derives from, is sustained by, and circles back to Jesus Christ (vv. 1, 14; cf. Rom. 11.36). That Greek word, μέτοχοι, *metochoi*, means that we have been united by a mandate and remit, sent from Jesus, to live the then and there of our heavenly provenance and home in every moment of the here and now of our earthly existence. And to do so *together*, with and for *one another*.

This is what it means to pray that God's Kingdom should come on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6.10).

We are seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 2.6). With the eye of our heart, we can see Him, exalted in glory (Eph. 1.15-23; Col. 3.1-3). He is indeed our fairest Lord Jesus, the Ruler of all creation (Ps. 45). We observe strong and holy angels going to and from upon Him to serve His purposes over all the earth (Jn. 1.52). Our hearts beat gladly with the continuous singing of departed saints who delight in nothing more than to sing the holiness and greatness of King Jesus (Rev. 4, 5). We *see* all this by faith. It's what we hope for one

day, in all its glory, because when we arrive there, we will see Jesus face to face (1 Jn. 3.1-3). And what we see and hope for is meant to bear fruit in our daily lives (Heb. 11.1; cf. 2 Pet. 3.11-14; 1 Jn. 3.3). In fragments, brief glimpses, momentary gestures, timely words, thoughtful acts of kindness, and ready helps, the beauty and power and wonder and majesty and mystery and sweetness and glory and holiness and *reality* of heaven come down to earth through our words and deeds, filling those spaces we occupy with the fragrance of Jesus and a foretaste of the world to come (2 Cor. 2.15, 16; Heb. 2.1-9).

Jesus intends to fill the world with Himself, and to do so through us, as we are emboldened and transformed by the Encourager from God, as He uses us to encourage one another in our heavenly calling (Eph. 4.8-10).

This is our heavenly calling. This is our calling in and from and unto Jesus. And it is this calling, as μέτοχοι, that we share in together and toward which we must encourage one another daily.

If

All this is conditional. It's all true and all available to every disciple of Jesus Christ. But it's conditional. As both Jesus and Paul remind us, it's possible to delude ourselves – to be deceived – into *believing* that we are disciples of Christ, seekers of His Kingdom, and bound for glory with Him, and to be in fact dead wrong. A day is coming, Jesus said, when many will appear before Him, fully confident of being received into glory, only to hear Him say, “Depart from Me; I never knew you” (Matt. 7.23). And Paul warned a whole city of professing Christians that it's possible *none* of them were anything other than reprobates when it came to sincere faith in Jesus (2 Cor. 13.5).

Twice in the passage we've been examining, *if* appears. First, in verse 6: “whose house we are *if* we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.” Then again in verse 14: “we have become partakers (μέτοχοι) of Christ *if* we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end”.

The Greek has two words for “if.” The first means something like “since” “or because it is so”. But that's not the word used here. The second, which has a couple of forms, means “if...and it might not actually be so”, and that's what the writer uses here.

How can we be sure of something that seems so iffy? By encouraging our fellow partakers, partners, and disciples in their heavenly calling in Christ, and by seeking out such people to encourage us as well.

Because the Christian life requires *courage*. God gives us courage through the work of His Spirit, as we have seen. And the Spirit is pleased to use us to *encourage* one another, so that we “hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” and “hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of [our] hope firm to the end.”

The days are evil. Deceitful, lying spirits are after us for complacency, not courage. But we can be used of God to bring a little bit of heaven to earth, and to bring more of Jesus into the world, if we will encourage one another and be encouraged in our journey as μέτοχοι together in Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. According to this passage, why is it important that we encourage others and are encouraged in our own walk with and work for the Lord? What can happen when we're encouraged?
2. What's working against our being thus encouraged? How can we recognize when we're being worked on like this?
3. Why is it important that we keep in mind that we and all believers in Jesus are μέτοχοι in this heavenly calling?

Parameters of Encouragement

Next steps – Preparation: Pray for the believers you will see today. Ask God to give you one special thing to do for each believer, to encourage them to hold fast their hope and press on in their heavenly calling.

6 Sign and Outpost

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ... Ephesians 4.11, 12

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all... 1 Corinthians 12.7

Say what?

In Matthew 13, Jesus regaled His disciples with a dizzying barrage of parables about the coming Kingdom of God. As we have seen, all believers have been conveyed into that Kingdom by the grace of God, and we are all called to seek that Kingdom and the glory of God that characterizes it as our highest calling and priority in life (1 Thess. 2.12; Matt. 6.33).

We can only imagine what the effects of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 13 might have been on the disciples. That teaching was then reinforced by their helping Jesus feed the 5,000, seeing Him walk on the Sea of Galilee, being with Him as He healed multitudes (Matt. 14), and marveling as He extended grace to a Gentile woman (Matt. 15.21ff). These episodes surely must have brightened and reinforced those powerful teachings about the Kingdom. All who would have heard would have been greatly encouraged and eager for the coming of this glorious and powerful realm.

Think of their surprise in Matthew 16, after Jesus commended Peter for rightly identifying Him as the Messiah, and telling him that such knowledge comes only by the grace of God the Father (Matt. 16.13-17), when He announced His plan to build His *Church*, rather than His *Kingdom*.

I wonder if the disciples were looking around at one another, with that "Say what?" look on their faces? Build His Church? What's that? An assembly? You mean like a *synagogue*? What happened to that glorious, precious, powerful, all-encompassing Kingdom? The disciples were all ready to assume their places as rulers in the Kingdom of God. Yeah! Bring it on. But now Jesus says He's going to build a synagogue? A "church"?

The Greek word we translate "church" – ἐκκλησία, *ekklesia* – translates the Hebrew word for "assembly" and was used for a large gathering of all God's people or for smaller, local gatherings – like a synagogue. The disciples surely had a little air taken out of their enthusiasm when Jesus declared His intention to use Peter and the rest of them to build an "assembly."

Indeed, they may have been so busy being disappointed and confused that they only barely heard Him say that the "keys of the Kingdom" would be given to them in that context (Matt. 16.18).

Church and Kingdom

For the rest of the New Testament, the Church seems to become the focal point of discipleship and Christian life. The book of Acts describes the church in Jerusalem as the launching pad for Paul's church-planting efforts in Asia Minor and Greece. Paul's epistles are addressed to churches and pastors of churches, while his specific mention of the Kingdom is sparse in comparison. Jesus wrote letters to churches in the book of Revelation, and these seem to have been His primary concern.

What happened to the Kingdom? Was it abandoned for a more tangible and more practical entity? One with which the followers of Christ would have had at least some experience? Or has the Kingdom simply been postponed until the return of the Lord?

No. The Kingdom is still the dominant vision throughout the New Testament, though it receives but scant

mention. Believers have been conveyed into the Kingdom, and the Kingdom is their primary and defining calling in life. Paul declared that all his preaching was Kingdom preaching (Acts 20.25). In all Paul's work, and that of the other apostles, Jesus was giving His promised Kingdom to the saints, even in the face of great persecution, and with the promise that they and His Kingdom would ultimately prevail (Dan. 7.18-27). The Church, as the temporal Body of Christ, possesses the keys to the Kingdom – the power to open the Kingdom and the power to shut it, to proclaim the Gospel and excommunicate gross offenders. Jesus is building His Church as His Body on earth, the agent of His grace, bearer of the Good News, and sign and outpost of the Kingdom.

The Church is the *sign* that the Kingdom has come. The Kingdom comes with the Holy Spirit and His power to make all things new. He converts the lost, gives gifts to every believer, and employs them in the work of building a new community where righteousness, peace, and joy are the defining characteristics. The Church is the sign to the world that eternity has broken into time, heaven is coming on earth, if only imperfectly, and the reconciled world is in process of being restored for the glory of God.

The Church is also the *outpost* from which the Kingdom advances into every area of life. As believers grow in their discipleship, embrace their heavenly calling, and seek the Kingdom and glory of God in every area of life, the reality of Christ's rule comes to light in how they live, work, relate, and grow. The Gospel of the Kingdom – the Good News that it is here and can be received through faith in Jesus Christ – shapes their priorities and animates their conversations. Their personal spheres become staging-grounds for the progress of the Kingdom.

Gifted for building

Every believer has been given gifts by the Holy Spirit of God. Those are to be used, first of all, to build-up and encourage other believers as disciples with a heavenly calling. As we work thus to encourage and edify one another, we strengthen the church to grow strong in the Lord, increasing in unity and maturity as the loving and serving Body of Christ in its community.

As we practice the discipline of encouragement, we must keep the church in mind. Jesus is building His Church, and so must we. Local churches grow as individual members are equipped for works of ministry, beginning with those good works of love that strengthen and encourage our fellow believers (Eph. 4.11, 12; Gal. 6.10; Heb. 10.24). As believers grow in their discipleship and take up their heavenly calling, their churches become more visible as the Body of Christ (the sign of the Kingdom) and more active, consistent, and effective in proclaiming and embodying the Kingdom (the outpost of the Kingdom).

All believers are members of the Body of Christ. However we seek to be encouraged, and however we hope to encourage others, we must remember that each of us has a contribution to make to the unity and maturity of the Church. Healthy, growing churches nurture healthy, growing church members, and contribute to the visible increase of the rule of King Jesus in their communities. Let us be encouraged and let us encourage others to join with Jesus in this Kingdom-building effort.

For reflection

1. In what sense has the Church been given the “keys of the Kingdom”?
2. How would you explain the relationship between the local church and the Kingdom of God?
3. How does the Kingdom of God come in and through local churches?

Next steps – Transformation: Seek the Lord in prayer daily, that He might show you how you should help your church to fulfill its calling as sign and outpost of the Kingdom of God.

7 To Restore God's Goodness

Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. Genesis 1.31

The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD. Psalm 33.5

I would have lost heart, unless I had believed

That I would see the goodness of the LORD

In the land of the living. Psalm 27.13

So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God." Matthew 19.17

All good

There can be no doubt that God's intention for His creation is that it should realize His goodness in whole and part. When we are seeking to be encouraged, or to encourage others, we must consider the nature of goodness, and how seeking goodness builds the Church, mirrors the character of Christ, brings heaven to earth, reflects the priorities of God's Word, advances His Kingdom, and brings Him glory. Goodness is the most practical, visible, tangible, and accessible arena within which we can act courageously according to our calling as followers of Christ. Our prayers should be illuminated and shaped by our understanding of God's goodness; and all we seek, of ourselves and those we encourage, is that through our courage the goodness of the Lord might come to light in the land of the living (Ps. 27.13; Eph. 2.10; 2 Tim. 3.15-17).

For the goodness of God leads to repentance (Rom. 2.4). Hence, realizing the goodness of God is an essential component of our witness, and a necessary precondition for effective evangelism.

God is the standard of all things good, as Jesus explained (Matt. 19.17). When God reflected on the creation at the end of the sixth day, He saw exactly what He intended to see. He saw the physical, spiritual, moral, and practical manifestation of His own inherent and perfect goodness. The world was just the way He wanted it to be.

Our calling now is to be equipped for every good work, that we might daily improve on our redemption; and, working with the goodness of God that still exists in this fallen world, bring more of His goodness to light in everything we do. And for this, we're going to need lots of courage, and so will those with whom we hope to advance this high and holy calling.

The goodness of God

God's goodness is first spiritual, in that He is a most pure Spirit, without any compromise of perfection or completion. We must ever strive to realize and maintain such goodness in our soul, keeping heart, mind, and conscience always submissive to and in line with the Word of God.

The goodness that issues from such infinite purity is, first, moral in nature, then practical in excellence, and finally, contributing to the flourishing of all things according to the divine will and plan. We do good when we walk according to the holy and righteous and good Law of God (Rom. 7.12), and when we do the good works of the Law which God has before ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2.10; Gal. 6.10). Every day we must try to improve in our works, to bring more of the excellence of God to light in them, whatever they may be. Thus we and everything to which we set our hands may expect to flourish in the good blessings of the Lord (Deut. 28.1-9).

God's goodness embodies His truth and reveals His beauty. Wherever we are seeking to bring the goodness

Parameters of Encouragement

of God to light, we must do so according to His truth and with a view to achieving something truly beautiful and reflective of the divine essence. These standards apply to all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities, and to everything we do, even the smallest or most routine (1 Cor. 10.31). The more we realize of the goodness of the Lord in every aspect of our lives, the more we flesh out the goals of our calling to God's Kingdom and glory, make progress in our pursuit of the likeness of Jesus Christ, and contribute to building His Church. And the more we bring the reality of heaven to tangible expression on earth.

In a world where the idea of *divine* goodness is universally scorned and rejected, we will need great courage to undertake the restoration of the world, as much of it as comes into our hands, according to the divine standard.

But the end of such a life of striving to realize the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living is to hear the voice of the one true and good God, saying to us, "Well done, *good* and faithful servant."

Courage for goodness

Jesus has set the table for our good works. He has reconciled the fallen and sinful world, and everything in it, back to the Father (2 Cor. 5.18, 19). What does this mean?

Jesus has reconciled all of creation, all culture and civilization, every nation and person, and all of creation back to God. He has taken His seat at the right hand of the Father, and is ruling over all things for the realization of God's goodness and glory. The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it (Ps. 24.1). And He is sending His people out, day by day, to bring the refreshing dew of grace and truth on all of life, that the goodness of the Lord may come to light in the land of the living (Pss. 27.13; 110.1-3).

But that doesn't mean that everything is yet what He intends it to be. As the writer of Hebrews explained, all the world and everything in it has been placed into the hands of God's redeemed people, that they might set it all in order unto the Lord – taking the reconciled world in hand, and restoring it to the standard of God's goodness in all things. And although we don't see that happening yet, we see Jesus, and seeing Jesus, we are encouraged – infused with courage from the Spirit of God – to do all things so as to reflect and refract the goodness, truth, and beauty of Jesus into our everyday world (Heb. 2.5-9).

It will take great courage to stand for the goodness of God in the land of the living. We must seek it from God's own Spirit, Who is at work within us to will and do of God's good pleasure (Phil 2.13). We must be quick to encourage one another in the Lord, and to undertake relentlessly whatever will bring the goodness of God to light in the land of the living, whether in works of great significance and visibility, or in everyday routines and situations, where we might be inclined to overlook God's desire to see His reconciled world restored to goodness in every way.

From the womb of the morning, and throughout each day, we are sent to the world for goodness. Let us take courage, encourage one another, and press on.

For reflection

1. How can you see that aspects of the goodness of God yet remain in the world? Why is it important that we see these where we can?
2. Goodness expresses the truth of God and results in His beauty being visible in tangible situations and things. Can you think of some examples of that from the life of Christ?
3. Why will we need courage, every day and again and again, to seek the goodness of God in today's world?

Next steps – Transformation: Make a list of all the areas of your life where God wants you to improve in goodness. Pray for these daily, and work courageously to bring more of God's goodness to light.

Parameters of Encouragement

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How would you explain the glory of God to a new believer?
2. What's the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church? What is your role in each of these?
3. How does the Spirit work to transform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ? What is our role in that work (Phil. 2.12, 13)?
4. What is our "heavenly calling"? What does it seek?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this part of our study on encouragement?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.