



C.A.R.E

DAILY HABITS THAT HELP YOU CARE FOR OTHERS.



CONNECT



Scripture commands us *not to neglect meeting together*. Yes, this verse speaks of congregational assembly, yet it is more. We were created to do life alone. Solomon in Ecclesiastes 4 teaches us that two are better than one. So let us be intentional to connect and not neglect each other.

AFFIRM



Scripture commands us "affirm one another in the Lord". Romans 12:10. Affirmation is acknowledging the work of Christ publicly in others. Affirmation, not flattery, fuels spiritual growth in others. Let us be intentional in the Lord's work in others around us and then affirm that work.

REJOICE



Birthdays, anniversaries, and the birth of a child or grandchild are a few reasons to celebrate. Scripture commands us to "*rejoice with those who rejoice*" Romans 12:15. Let us be intentional in celebrating all of God's blessing in others' lives.

ENCOURAGE



No matter who we are we need encouragement. Even the great Apostle Paul took with him Barnabas whose name means son of encouragement. Scripture commands us to do this because no one knows our need more than our Creator. "*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up,*" 1 Thessalonians 5:11

ONE ANOTHER'S I CAN'T FIND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

RAY ORTLUND

The beautiful “one another” commands of the New Testament are famous. But it is also striking to notice the “one anothers” that do not appear there.

For example, sanctify one another, humble one another, scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, marginalize one another, exclude one another, judge one another, run one another’s lives, confess one another’s sins

The kind of God we really believe in is revealed in how we treat one another. The lovely gospel of Jesus positions us to treat one another like royalty, and every non-gospel positions us to treat one another like dirt. But we will follow through horizontally on whatever we really believe vertically.

Our relationships with one another reveal to us what we really believe as opposed to what we think we believe, our convictions as opposed to our opinions. It is possible for the gospel to remain at the shallow level of opinion, even sincere opinion, without penetrating to the deeper level of conviction. But when the gospel grips us down in our convictions, we embrace its implications wholeheartedly. Therefore, when we mistreat one another, our problem is not a lack of surface niceness but a lack of gospel depth. What we need is not only better manners but, far more, true faith.

Then the watching world might start feeling that Jesus himself has come to town:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
(John 13:34-35)

How Community Spurs Spiritual Growth

For many Christians, the new year represents another opportunity to carry out well-intentioned resolutions. Whether reading through the Bible in a year, memorizing Scripture, or devoting time to prayer, January often brings fresh energy and resolve. For the vast majority of us, it also reminds us of past failures to follow through.

Perhaps we have approached these good, godly resolutions in the wrong way. What if we could keep up our resolutions for more consistent Bible intake and more regular prayer while drawing in our brothers and sisters in Christ to do the same? Perhaps what's missing in many of our resolutions is the local church.

Consider with me how our resolutions to read the Bible and pray, for instance, might be transformed if we resolved first to more meaningfully commit and engage with our local church.

Hearing God Everywhere

When it comes to hearing God in his word, committing ourselves to the life of a local church is like entering the best kind of echo chamber.

By committing to our church's gatherings and the relationships God has given us there, we find Scripture reverberating into nearly every part of our lives. Yes, we should endeavor to spend personal time in Scripture each day. By folding our lives into a local church, though, we make Bible intake not just a personal event each morning, but something that happens in a variety of ways throughout the week.

In the local church, the word of God reverberates out of the church's teaching ministry and into the relationships of its members (2 Timothy 4:2; Colossians 3:16). Consider what this might look like in your own life. Perhaps you already read Scripture each morning. You may double the amount of Bible you enjoy each week by simply committing to, and showing up for, Sunday School and corporate worship. You might also become part of a church small group or Bible study that gathers each week to discuss the Sunday sermon — another precious avenue into the word of God.

Even beyond that, you'll find that God's people, those called together by God's word, are constantly repeating God's word back to one another in ordinary conversation: "I was struggling with anger, but God recently convicted me as I read this verse in James." "I'm not sure how God will provide but I'm trusting in these promises from Ephesians." "God has really helped me grow as a parent by meditating on these commands in Matthew."

In the best of ways, the local church can serve as a kind of echo chamber for the Bible. The more you fold your life into the church, the more you'll find God's word reverberating through your relationships into every corner of your heart and life.

Fueling Momentum for Prayer

Similarly, the new year often brings fresh resolve to pray — we want to commune with God better this year than we did last year. But our disciplines of prayer, like Bible reading, often diminish as the year progresses.

Once again, one way to keep the discipline of prayer alive is by committing ourselves to a local church — a people committed to and characterized by prayer (Acts 2:42; 4:23-31; 6:1-6; 8:14-15; 12:1-5; 13:1-3; 20:36). As we gather with the church for prayer, we learn not only how to pray, we remind ourselves of the priority of prayer and the centrality of God's glory in our lives.

Each week, for instance, my church gathers for prayer, and each week I'm reminded at how shallow and self-focused my prayers can become. Every week the pastor asks the congregation to pray for the regular preaching of the word, that the lost in our neighborhood would come to know Christ, that our church would be a faithful witness of unity in diversity, and that our congregation would faithfully care for one another.

Beyond that, church members ask for prayer for evangelistic conversations and for those among us who are sick and suffering, and they also share ways we can praise God for his faithfulness. As I hear these requests, I'm pulled out of shallow prayer ruts and reminded to pray, as Jesus taught, "Your kingdom come." These gatherings for prayer re-inform and reignite my personal prayer habits.

When we pray by ourselves we can struggle to "get going." We lose stamina, or we simply drift into prayerlessness. But gathering with God's people to pray is like jumping onto a moving train. We get caught up in the momentum of the church's prayers. If your church has a weekly prayer meeting, you already have an amazing opportunity to grow in prayer this year. Consider making that meeting an immovable, sacred appointment in your calendar (or starting a prayer meeting for your church!).

If you struggle to pray, don't merely resolve to do better each year; resolve to link arms with your church. Jump onto that moving train, and let the prayers of others energize and sharpen your personal prayer life.

Resolve Yourself to Your Church

We don't simply join a church because it helps us keep spiritually vibrant (though it does do that). We join a church to obey Christ, love his people, and serve others. If you make resolutions, don't merely consider how you might increase your own Bible intake and prayer. Resolve that your Bible intake and prayer will encourage others to walk more faithfully and know God more fully.

Of course, we can only fulfill that resolution as we join a church and meaningfully engage with God's people. By joining a local church, we can fully live out Scripture's commands to love one another (John 13:34-35), show honor to one another (Romans 12:10), serve one another (Galatians 5:13), bear with one another, forgive one another (Colossians 3:12-13), and encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

The author of Hebrews shows just how important regularly gathering with God's people is to the Christian life:

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. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

If we're not gathering with God's people, we're not simply failing to show up. We're also failing to stir others up to love and good works, and we're failing to encourage others to persevere in the faith. Consider resolving to know God more fully in fellowship with his people, so that they might strengthen your faith and so that you might encourage theirs.

If you want to know God more, pray more frequently, and serve God more faithfully, join a church and commit to God's people. If you're already a member of a local church but you've been living on the margins, perhaps this new year is your call to resolve afresh to fold your life more thoroughly into the life of the church.

SOMEONE NEEDS YOUR ENCOURAGEMENT

When was the last time you felt meaningfully encouraged by another believer?

Many of us may be able to quickly call to mind a conversation, maybe even from the past week. Others may struggle to remember a distinct moment we felt encouraged. Some will feel they have experienced godly encouragement when they haven't. Others will assume they have *not* experienced godly encouragement when they actually have. Perhaps many of us fail to experience and extend encouragement because we don't yet know what encouragement is.

The way we often use *encouragement* today, it could mean mere comfort or affirmation. "You did a great job on that project." "You're a very good mother." "Everything's going to be okay." But biblical encouragement, though often rich with affirmation, offers something far stronger and more invigorating. While poor encouragement may inflame pride or coddle self-pity, real encouragement cultivates humility, courage, and, above all, hope in God. While poor encouragement might justify passivity, real encouragement inspires fresh vigilance and faithfulness.

True encouragement is not about making others feel better about themselves, but preparing them to know, obey, and enjoy more of God.

Encouragement or Flattery?

Affirmation alone is not encouragement. In fact, it might just be flattery in sheep's clothes. And flattery poisons what encouragement nurtures.

"A man who flatters his neighbor," says Proverbs 29:5, "spreads a net for his feet." Or even more severely, "A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin" (Proverbs 26:28). Flattery is not sweet or harmless; it ruins souls. It is pleasant makeup on ruthless selfishness. Its effect is not loving, but ruinous. Cultivating a habit or culture of true encouragement may begin with taking more seriously the severity of God's warnings about flattery.

The apostle Paul hated flattery (1 Thessalonians 2:5), because he had tasted the bitter and divisive fruit of flattery. “Such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive” (Romans 16:18). The flatterer uses other people’s insecurities to serve his own cravings for approval, for power and influence, and in some cases for financial gain or illicit sex. Flattery is a subtly aggressive strategy for indulging some idolatry. And it preys on the naive — on those who think flattery is sweet or harmless. Ironically, flattery can deceive and ruin the flatterer by making even him believe himself loving.

So, what sets true encouragement apart from its dangerous counterpart?

How Does God Encourage Someone?

God not only gives us instructions and examples of good encouragement in Scripture, but he also stoops down himself to show us how to encourage a human heart. When Moses died, right as Israel was about to cross into the Promised Land, God appointed Joshua to lead the people against nations mightier and more fearsome than his own. One can hardly imagine a more intimidating calling. The Lord comes to encourage — literally, to impart strength and courage — to Joshua,

Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. . . . Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:6–7, 9)

This is encouragement in a finer, more penetrating, more compelling form. So, what sets these words apart from flattery?

TELLS THE TRUTH

First, true encouragement tells the truth. Flattery typically exaggerates an aspect of the truth, twisting or inflating it for selfish reasons. Encouragement knows it can only be as fruitful as it is faithful. We know God is telling the truth to Joshua, because he cannot lie (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2). When he says, “You shall cause this people to inherit the land,” we know it will happen exactly as he has said. So, when we encourage, do we resist the temptation to hide what might hurt or to say more than is really true?

The flatterer wants to gratify the pride and vanity of his victim, so he isolates admirable qualities and exaggerates them — he makes good work sound excellent, small sacrifices sound like great ones, little fruit sound like a garden bursting with life — all while refusing to identify and confront sin and error. Or he takes ugly qualities and makes them seem admirable — making selfishness sound like self-care, pride like self-confidence, anger like passion, greed like ambition, dishonesty like love.

The godly encourager, by contrast, speaks the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). He knows the spiritual danger of pride, so as he affirms, he takes care to not indulge or stimulate it in others. He commends what is commendable without feeling the need to exaggerate. He also doesn’t overlook or excuse sin, but confronts, forgives, and restores from the same love with which he affirms. Over time, consistent encouragement without any correction may not be telling the whole truth.

AIMS AT OBEDIENCE

Second, true encouragement aims at obedience to God. “Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left.” This kind of encouragement is not merely about standing up to opposition or overcoming fears, but about trusting and obeying all that God says.

Paul prays for the same kind of encouragement when he writes, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father . . . comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17). Flattery doesn’t inspire love for God and his word because it overflows from a heart in love with self. So, does our encouragement bear the fruit of difficult obedience in every good work and word? Is the encouragement we receive helping us defy temptation and pick up our cross again today?

STRENGTHENS HOPE IN GOD

Third, true encouragement strengthens hope in God, not in self. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” Flattery makes God seem nice but unnecessary. It turns the sovereign Author and Sustainer of all things into a cheerleader for our self-sufficiency.

There is a world of difference — a universe of difference — between “You can do this” and “God will be with you.” And yet how often does our encouragement fall more in line with the former? How often do we accentuate what we have done or can do, rather than taking refuge in what God has promised to do for and through us because of Christ? Real encouragement says, “Apart from him you can do nothing — but he will be with you wherever you go.”

Do you want to test the encouragement you give and receive in your relationships? Ask if it consistently tells the truth, even the hard truths; if it invites and inspires a rigorous and joyful obedience; if it strengthens hope in God and not in self.

Take Heart

The encouraging God, however, did not stay at arm’s length. He was not content to send encouragement into the world through inspired messengers, but came to embody encouragement in flesh and blood. And so Jesus did.

Even on the eve of his betrayal, preparing to brave the mob, the cross, and the grave, Jesus stopped to encourage the fragile and fearful men following him. And how did he encourage them?

Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:32-33)

He told them the truth: “I am about to die and leave you. And despite your good intentions now, you will each abandon me. And after I have gone, you will face even worse tribulation.” His encouragement did not veil the shame of their betrayals or the harshness of what they would each suffer.

He also, however, told them the truth of all he would be for them through the darkness: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. . . . Take heart; I have overcome the world.” In those fragile and fearful moments, he was not building up their self-confidence (quite the opposite). He was training them to endure by hope in him.

And in the face of a bleak outlook, promising to be with them wherever they went, he called them to obey. “Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (John 15:9-10). Because real encouragement fuels real obedience. And real obedience proves we live in the love of Christ.

We each need this kind of honest, hopeful, Godward encouragement, week in and week out, as we follow Jesus (Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25). That means someone we know probably needs that kind of encouragement too, even today.

Weep, But Also Rejoice

The apostle Paul tells us that we are the channels for the comfort of God. The God of all comfort has chosen to comfort his people in their affliction through his saints (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). We all share in Christ's sufferings; therefore, we all may share in God's comfort and extend that comfort to others in Christ.

But the form that such comfort takes is often elusive. What does it look like for us to comfort others in their affliction with the comfort we have received from God? In Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* we catch a glimpse of one form that comfort takes. In a brief interaction over three pages, God helped me to see more clearly how to bring wisdom and compassion together to comfort the grieving.

The Elder and the Grieving Mother

Father Zosima is a Russian monk and the mentor of Alyosha Karamazov, the hero of the novel. Early on, we are introduced to Father Zosima as he shepherds and comforts a group of women who have come to him burdened with various griefs, trials, and tragedies. These women have come with an unquenchable grief, a grief that breaks forth from silence into tears and lamentation. These lamentations "ease the heart only by straining and exacerbating it more and more. Such grief does not even want consolation; it is nourished by the sense of its unquenchableness. Lamentations are simply the need to constantly irritate the wound".

One such woman is a grieving mother who has buried her four children. The death of her last son at two years old has completely wrecked her. Her soul is wasted over him. Everything in her home reminds her of her little boy and sends her spiraling into despair.

In her grief, she has left her home, abandoned her husband, and lost herself in sorrow. She has come to Zosima seeking she knows not what. But Zosima is ready to meet her in her grief with the kind of wisdom and compassion that we need to comfort those in similar afflictions.

Weep, But Rejoice

So, what does Zosima do? First, he tells her a story of another grieving mother who was comforted by a great saint. The saint encouraged the grieving mother in the story by reminding her that infants who die are presently rejoicing with the angels in God's glorious presence.

Now, such a story creates space in the heart of the grieving mother. To listen to the story, she must, as it were, step outside her grief and consider what was said to the other mother. And of course, Zosima tells her the story so that she can come to see herself in it. He echoes the counsel of the saint in the story, though with a twist. Whereas the saint in the story had told the grieving mother, "Rejoice, and do not weep," Zosima alters his encouragement to the mother before him, saying, "Weep, then, but also rejoice".

So then, Zosima first takes the grieving mother out of herself and into a story in hope that she might find herself and learn to weep, but also to rejoice.

The grieving mother brings the lesson home; Zosima's words echo what her husband Nikitushka had told her. He too had sought to encourage her with the presence of their son before God's throne. But grief overpowers this truth. Wherever her child is, he's not *here*, with her. The reality of her son's absence emotionally overpowers the truth of her son's presence with God. All she can think of is his little voice saying, "Mama, where are you?" and his little feet pattering across the floor, and his laughter and shouting and joy. And now he's gone, and she'll never hear or see him again.

Weep, But Remember

As the woman collapses into tears, Zosima speaks a second time, this time placing this grieving mother in the biblical story. "This is Rachel of old 'weeping for her children, and she would not be comforted, because they are not' [see Jeremiah 31:15]".

And Zosima echoes this biblical truth. There is a godly refusal to be comforted in one's grief, as with Rachel. Zosima, in essence, grants permission for this woman's refusal to be comforted. "Do not be comforted," he says. "Do not be comforted, but weep." But then he adds, "Only each time you weep, do not fail to remember." Remember where your son is and with Whom.

And with these words, Zosima points the way forward. For now, refuse to be comforted. Like Rachel, lean into the sorrow. But as you press in, remember the goodness and kindness of God. And in time, weeping with remembrance will turn lamentation into "quiet joy," and bitter tears into "tears of quiet tenderness". Weeping may last for the night (and the night may last for a long time), but joy comes in the morning.

What Is His Name?

Zosima is not done. Having pointed the way forward, he himself leans into the suffering. He promises to remember her child and her in his prayers, and he asks for the child's name.

"Alexei, dear father." "A lovely name! After Alexei, the man of God?" "Of God, dear father, of God. Alexei, the man of God." "A great saint! I'll remember, mother, I'll remember, and I'll remember your sorrow in my prayers."

A small interchange, but I think highly significant. In asking for the child's name, Zosima communicates that he truly sees this woman, in all of her grief and pain. And he offers to join her in it. While she labors to weep and remember the mercy of God, Zosima will labor to remember her sorrow and her son. What's more, he affirms her son's name, connecting it to a saint from the past. He dignifies this mother and her son, and in doing so builds a further connection.

Weep, But Return

But Zosima has one final step, a call to action. Not only does he promise to remember little Alexei and his grieving mother, but he goes on to say, “I’ll remember your sorrow in my prayers, and I’ll remember your husband too.” This mother is not the only one who is grieving. And this husband has lost not only his son, but his wife as well. By bringing him to mind, Zosima is setting the stage to exhort this grieving mother and put her back on the path of healing.

Zosima says, “It is a sin to desert him. Go to your husband and take care of him”. This too is love and comfort. Zosima is reminding her, “Yes, you may weep. Yes, you may refuse to be comforted for a time (and even a long time). But in your weeping, do not sin. In your grief over this tragic loss, do not abandon God’s calling on you in the present.”

And Zosima’s words have their effect. The grieving mother exclaims, “I will go, my dear, according to your word, I will go. You’ve touched my heart. Nikitushka, my Nikitushka, you are waiting for me!” And she sets out on her long pilgrimage home.

Stories That Point to the Story

Of course, this little vignette is simply a story in a novel. But as in this brief conversation, stories are powerful. Stories are soul food, as one author puts it. And they can help us in soul care.

Stories can help us to gain perspective, to step outside of our own lives in order to reflect on reality. Stories can point us to The Story, so that we can find ourselves in God’s narrative when we’re lost and adrift. Stories can direct us to the truth, helping us to remember and to connect both with God and with each other. And stories can direct us to action, to remind us of God’s call upon us, so that we might walk in the light as he is in the light.

Praising Others Is Not Optional

God-centered praise of those who are not God is not optional. A fire not stoked goes out. A refrigerator unplugged rots the eggs. A garden not tended erupts with weeds. Affirmation is the fire-stoking, refrigerator-electrifying, garden-tending side of relationships. Relationships in which commendable things are not commended, but overlooked, take on a flavor. The relationship is marked, and we take on a reputation to those around us.

Barnabas is called the “son of encouragement.” What’s my reputation? Mr. Crabby Pants? Old Lady Battle-Axe? Miss Nit-Pick? We bring refreshment to relationships when we unleash so many affirmations that those around us lose track.

I am not suggesting a checklist approach to life. Healthy affirming is more organic, a way of living. It’s more like romance than rocket science. It’s less like knitting (with its knit one, pearl two) and more like the weather – how much rain is enough? Well, that depends on how dry it’s been. And what are you trying to grow – a watermelon or a tumbleweed?

Jesus said, “As you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (Matthew 25:41) If you didn’t affirm them, you didn’t affirm him.

The thing that compounds a deficiency in affirmation is a surplus of corrections in a relationship. Corrections outweigh affirmations. They have greater impact individually. The sting of rebuke outweighs the fresh whiff of a bouquet of affirmations. A person sniffing flowers when a bee stings quickly forgets the flowers, even if the bouquet is very large. If a pattern of corrections is outweighing the affirmations, the sting stays with us, and added corrections are like picking at the scab made by the sting.

A rash word is like a sword thrust (Proverbs 12:18). It only takes a moment to cut somebody with a sword, but it takes a long time to heal, and is aided by ointment, and even then it might leave a scar. Affirmations are like ointment that can assist the healing.

When we don't affirm those around us enough, they stop hearing our corrections, eventually stop listening to us altogether, and perhaps become oppositional toward us. Conversely, affirmations gain a hearing for us. The principle is this: people tend to be influenced by those who praise them. It's true in marriages, families, classrooms, churches, and even true in our relationship with God, for what does he inhabit? Answer: the praises of his people.

Puritan Richard Baxter said, "They love those who best esteem them highest. The fault of these admirers can be extenuated and easily forgiven. If you would have his favor, let him hear that you have magnified him behind his back and that you honor him..."

John Calvin says, "We readily believe those whom we know to be desirous of our welfare, connecting the hearing of those around us with our manifest goodwill toward them, which is made manifest by commending them when they reflect Christ."

Affirmation is the purpose of the universe – specifically affirmation of God. Lord, help me honor you and refresh others by commending the work you are doing in them.

The Dangerous ‘Well Done’

It is sometimes good, and often dangerous, to be praised by other people.

We know praise from others is sometimes good because the writer of Proverbs says, “a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (Proverbs 31:30). The apostle Paul encourages those who serve as deacons to “gain a good standing for themselves” (1 Timothy 3:13). The Bible is full of praise for people — for their physical beauty (Genesis 24:16; 1 Samuel 16:12), humility (Numbers 12:3), wisdom and understanding (Daniel 1:17), godliness (Luke 1:6), faithfulness in ministry (Colossians 4:7, 9), and more.

But praise from other people always arrives with potential dangers. Therefore, if we’re wise, we will reflect biblically on the perils of praise.

Praise from others may mislead us.

On September 30, 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain signed the Munich Agreement, granting Adolf Hitler control of Czechoslovakia so long as Hitler agreed not to go any farther. That same day, Chamberlain and Hitler agreed on a peace treaty between Germany and the United Kingdom.

Chamberlain returned home to exuberant English crowds, declaring “peace for our time.” He was showered with praise. One member of Parliament spoke of his “courage, sincerity and skillful leadership.” Another said, “Our leader will go down to history as the greatest European statesman of this or any other time.” This all must have felt very good to hear. But most historians today regard the Munich Agreement as part of a disastrously failed policy of appeasement led by Chamberlain. Applause and adulation was not what he needed.

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Praise for our mistaken or sinful thoughts and behavior can entrench us in error and rebellion. “Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the law strive against them” (Proverbs 28:4). Effusive praise may in fact be much less helpful than painful correction. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Proverbs 27:6).

We should not ignore or spurn all praise. But we should be constantly alert to the dangers of being misled by it.

Praise from others may distract us.

Jesus criticized the religious leaders of his day for living to be praised by other people (Matthew 6:2). The problem is that human praise can become an idol that distracts us from a greater, higher praise we're made to enjoy and meant to pursue. Astoundingly, the New Testament teaches that God's people will one day receive praise from God himself (Romans 2:29; 1 Peter 1:7). We're meant to live for God's pleasure-filled praise, for his "well done." But it's almost impossible to do that when we're living instead for the good opinion of those around us.

The Gospel of John says the religious authorities "loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God" (John 12:43). They were distracted by a lesser glory. We're meant to live for a greater one.

In his essay "The World's Last Night," C.S. Lewis reflected on "the irresistible light" of God's future judgment. It will be, he said, the only absolutely infallible and final verdict on every person who has ever lived. "We shall not only believe, we shall know, beyond doubt in every fiber of our appalled or delighted being, that as the Judge has said, so we are: neither more, nor less, nor other." At that final day, the good or bad opinions of others will matter not at all. We're made and meant to live undistractedly for God's praise.

Praise from others may destroy us.

Whenever we're praised, we're probed. Commentators debate the exact meaning of Proverbs 27:21, but one common understanding is that the praise we receive reveals our hearts. "The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise."

Will we keep the praise for ourselves, or give credit to God? Will we become puffed up, feeling superior to others, confident in ourselves? Charles Bridges wrote, “Praise is a sharper trial of the strength of principle than reproach.” It’s not an exaggeration to say that praise, in fact, may be a catastrophically bad thing for us. The Puritan minister John Flavel issued a clear warning: “Christian! Thou knowest thou carriest gunpowder about thee. Desire those that carry fire to keep at a distance. It is a dangerous crisis, when a proud heart meets with flattering lips.”

The Safest Praise

Very much like fire, praise from (and of) other people is both a gift and a danger, meant to be carefully stewarded. We ought to be wise, thoughtful, and measured in receiving it — and in giving it.

In stark contrast, we need not hold back or restrain ourselves in our praise of God. Instead, we may be extravagant and exuberant. That’s because God doesn’t face the same dangers in giving and receiving praise. He is never misled, distracted, or destroyed by it. In fact, he made us (Isaiah 43:21) and saved us (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14) so that we would praise him.

We’re exhorted again and again, throughout the Bible, to cut loose in our praise of God — to praise him “more and more.” We’re urged to praise God continually (Psalm 34:1; 71:8; 145:2), corporately (Psalm 35:18), creatively (Psalm 98:1), skillfully (Psalm 33:3), loudly (1 Chronicles 15:16), universally (Psalm 48:10; 66:8), enduringly (Psalm 30:12), increasingly (Psalm 71:14), and supremely (Psalm 96:4).

It is sometimes good, and often dangerous, to be praised by other people. It is always good and never dangerous to sing God’s praise for his strength, wisdom, beauty, and worth.

Is It God-Centered to Praise People?

Isn't the commendation of people idolatrous? If we should make our boast in God alone, how dare we praise mere people? Have we gone off the deep end, away from God-centeredness and into the popular cultural psycho-jargon of self-esteem?

No.

If we aim to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things – including the commendation of people – then we are most definitely not speaking of their self-esteem. The jails are full of individuals who already have too much self-esteem. Just about all they think of is themselves. They, like we, are born that way: self-centered. Who has ever heard an infant in the nursery crying because some other child is wet or hungry?

We should not shrink from affirming people. To affirm people well is to affirm the work of God in them, and God is at work everywhere. Even the unbeliever is stamped in his image. If we seek for his work, we can find it. We shall find it. That's why the subtitle of my book *Practicing Affirmation* is: *The God-Centered Praise of Those Who Are Not God*.

Affirming well is both a science that can be studied, learned, and taught (hence books can be written about it), and it is an art. A good artist has a kind of eye. The good artist sees something, and then helps others see it. We can ask God for eyes that see.

If you think praising people is idolatrous, then fasten your seat-belt and put on your heresy crash helmet for this next assertion: God himself praises people. I can hear the objections: "What!? God praises people!? That's totally upside down!" But God does indeed praise people.

The Lord affirms Noah as righteous in his generation (Genesis 7:1). He calls Solomon "very great" and "majestic" (1 Chronicles 29:25). Jesus commends the woman of great faith (Matthew 15:28), marvels at the faith of the centurion (Luke 7:9), affirms Nathaniel for not being a hypocrite (John 1:47), to name a few.

Not only has God praised people in the past, but He will in the future. There is something defective about the person who does not want God to praise him. Every individual who has ever existed should desire to hear God one day say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

What keeps God’s praise of man from becoming man-centered idolatry? Answer: man’s immediate recognition that everything commendable in himself is owing to God, coupled with a humble, grateful, joyful desire to deflect that praise right back to God. When Paul boasts of his own work, saying, “I worked harder than any of them,” he immediately follows it up with “though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Meanwhile, cautions are justifiable, for it is possible to praise people poorly, even wrongly – making much of shallow, passing qualities. Commending wrong behaviors. Flattering people with insincere exaggerations motivated by the desire to obtain wrong-headed favors.

So we are wise to commend that which is most commendable in people. What is it that makes something commendable? We will look at that in tomorrow’s post.

OUTDO ONE ANOTHER IN SHOWING HONOR

Ray Ortland Jr.

"Outdo one another in showing honor." Romans 12:10

"They who avow the doctrines distinguished by the name of Calvinistic, ought, if consistent with their own principles, to be most gentle and forbearing of all men." John Newton, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late William Grimshaw*, page 67.

"John Wesley never encouraged criticism of George Whitefield. 'Do you think we shall see Mr. Whitefield in heaven?' asked one small-minded disciple. 'No,' replied Wesley, and the man looked pleased that he had aimed his flattery well. 'No sir,' said Wesley, 'I fear not. Mr. Whitefield will be so near the Throne and we at such a distance, we shall hardly get a sight of him.'" John Pollock, *George Whitefield and the Great Awakening*, page 244.

I am Reformed. I am grateful for all I have learned from my Reformed brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. But I am also grateful for others — Dispensationalists, Methodists, Charismatics and others who do not align with me in some aspects of theology. Theology matters. Our differences matter. But what we share in common in Christ matters more. And I not only accept that as a fact; I rejoice in it as a fellowship.

I am grateful for Dallas Theological Seminary, where I studied from 1971 to 1975. I am no longer a Dispensationalist. But I will go to my grave thanking the Lord for the biblical languages and exegesis DTS drilled into me. Every day of ministry since my ordination in 1975, what DTS gave me has made a wonderful difference.

I am grateful for my Wesleyan brothers and sisters. I don't accept the traditional Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification. But if I ever become half the Christian that Robert E. Coleman, for example, is, then I will be a better man than I am now. I admire him, and others like him, as fathers in the Lord.

I am grateful for my Charismatic brothers and sisters. I remain unpersuaded by some of their arguments. But they taught me to stop treating a church service as mere doctrinal rehearsal; they helped me see it as an encounter with the living Christ. They expect the Lord to do something, and they are right.

I am grateful for so many who are located elsewhere within the Body of Christ. As I observe myself, it often happens that I notice a phrase or even a word finding its way into a sermon, something that echoes a Christian who contributed to me long ago without even realizing it. And this includes some people, unlike my friends mentioned above, whom I don't particularly like. But they taught me. They showed me something. And I am better off for it.

Many disparate believers, in many ways, have helped me toward the Lord. How could I be ungrateful? I don't believe that verses like Romans 12:10 apply only to other Reformed believers. My heart has been stretched out beyond that circle, without diminishing my own convictions, and for that too I am grateful.

12 STRATEGIES FOR WELCOMING ONE ANOTHER WHEN OUR OPINIONS DIFFER

THABITI ANYABWILE

Options for church unity are wider than we admit. After all, unity does not require uniformity. But if it's true that unity does not require uniformity, what do we do when we find we are not uniform in belief and practice? And if the areas of difference are important rather than superficial, how do we keep that lack of uniformity from threatening or resulting in disunity?

It seems to me these are the questions the church now faces and has been facing for a while. In congregations across the United States, leaders and members have been trying to figure this out. Some have confused uniformity for unity and made requirements of members that cannot be substantiated by Scripture (i.e., the sometimes subtle and sometimes explicit notion that one must vote Republican or not vote in order to “be a sound Christian”). Others have opted to not address or address only sparingly those matters where members are not uniform, hoping the matters will die down or thinking that to address them at all would be to create or further disunity (i.e., the strategy of not praying for, lamenting, or saying anything about instances of racial injustice). These options do not work. Tensions involving conscience and freedom, diversity and difference continue to rise.

What should Christian leaders and members do when they are not uniform in some matters, particularly important matters involving things like “race” and racial injustice or politics and voting? For those interested to maintain unity where there may be significant disagreement on important ethical matters, here are 12 things to apply from Romans 14:1–15:7.

Know Whether You Are Weak or Strong in the Faith (Rom. 14:1)

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables” (Rom. 14:1–2).

“Weak” and “strong” have nothing to do with how long someone has been a Christian or their theological system itself. It has to do with their conscience and whether their conscience allows them freedom where Christ’s word actually grants freedom or whether their conscience creates rules and restrictions in place of the freedom Christ’s word allows. The person “weak in faith” develops rules and considers breaking those rules a sin, even though it’s not. The person “strong” in faith enjoys the freedom Christ gives with a sense of Christ’s approval. The difference between the two groups show up in their practices—not in their formal theology. One makes rules to restrict legitimate freedom, while the other enjoys the freedom Christ gives.

If we would have unity where we lack uniformity, then the weak and strong in faith must not quarrel with each other. Rather, they must understand each other and themselves. We must stop to ask: “According to the Scripture, am I weak or strong in faith? Am I enjoying the liberty of Christ, or am I making rules and restrictions where there are none biblically?”

Knowing we are “weak in faith” provides opportunity for us to be free in Christ. But the difficulty is that the weak in faith often believe themselves to be strong precisely because they have rules that appear correct to them. The failure of others to obey the rules of the weak only reinforces the sense of rightness in the weak. Until we examine whether we’re weak or strong, and until teachers in the church teach members these categories, we will “quarrel over opinions” and miss opportunities for unity amid difference. Moreover, we’ll miss important opportunities to bear unified witness against the evils of our age. Determining whether we are weak or strong is the first discussion to have on the way to unity. Everything that follows depends on this first issue.

Recognize the Difference Between Disputable Opinions and Moral Commands (Rom. 14:1)

Romans 14–15 does not address cardinal issues of Christian theology (i.e., the Trinity, the crucifixion, the deity of Christ, and so on). Nor does it address clear moral teaching of sin and righteousness (i.e., Rom. 1:18–32). In cardinal doctrine and moral imperative there can be no difference of opinion without distorting Christianity itself.

Romans 14–15 addresses “opinions” (Rom. 14:1), or as the NIV renders it “disputable matters.” The particular opinions in Rome involved dietary preferences and observance of special religious days. Church members in Rome were judging and condemning one another over these opinions. But the gospel and Christian morality did not ride on such things, which is what made their judgments so egregious. These were areas of Christian liberty wherein Christians of like precious faith could and did disagree. These areas of disagreement necessarily involved the individual conscience, and no two consciences are exactly alike in these “disputable matters.”

So if the church wants unity where it does not have uniformity, it must distinguish between the indisputable and the disputable. A significant amount of consternation in the church today is a failure at precisely this point. What really is a non-negotiable of the Christian faith—either in terms of doctrinal teaching or moral imperative—and what is a “disputable matter” or “opinion” (which is not to say such matters are unimportant, just that they are matters that admit difference and sometimes ambiguity)? Once we figure out whether we are strong or weak on any given topic, then distinguishing clear biblical command from personal opinion is the second discussion to have on the way to unity.

Refuse to Despise Those Who Differ from You (Rom. 14:3)

“Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.” Those who enjoy their liberty to eat are the ones strong in faith. Their conscience allows them more freedom in eating without feeling like they’re sinning. Those who abstain are the “weak in faith.” Their conscience will not allow them to eat meat without feeling guilty of sin.

The Bible does not say, “Let the strong convince the weak to change their mind.” It does not say, “Let the weak convince the strong to give up meat.” I think this text implicitly disallows resolution by an act of power.

Instead, the Bible says, “Stop judging each other critically.” The Bible says, “Do not despise a person whose conscience is different from your own.” But how often do we hear Christians call into question the salvation of other Christians over differences of opinion about topics involving liberty? The Bible confronts our tendency to usurp God’s role in judgment in these matters. The Bible says, “Stop despising each other.”

The reason we should stop judging people over opinions and disputable matters is because God has already welcomed them. How can we condemn those God has already accepted in the gospel of Jesus Christ? If we need a rule in these matters, let it be the rule to never despise those who differ from us on opinions. Let us know whether we are weak or strong, discern the difference between clear biblical command and personal opinion, and then refuse to despise those who differ.

Leave Judgment to God (Rom. 14:4-5)

“Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

Our disputes over opinions do not stop with the topics of dispute themselves (i.e., eating or celebration days). Another opinion often follows closely—opinions about whether those we disagree with are truly Christians. It’s a common temptation. We soon hear ourselves wonder or see others say or write, “I’m not sure they’re really Christians.”

But our fellow Christians are not our servants to judge. They do not belong to us. We did not save them. They belong to Another, to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Our brothers and sisters will each appear to their true Master who alone will decide whether they stand or fall.

Notice the assurance. Our brothers and sisters will be upheld because it is the Lord who makes them stand! We should stop being so quick to wonder whether somebody is saved simply because they differ from us on a disputable matter. We should be far quicker to look at one another as people saved by the blood of Christ who belong to their One Master—Jesus the Lord.

If we are tempted to make a judgment of others in opinions, let it be the judgment that God is able to save them on that great and terrible Day. Let the certainty of God’s salvation be the emphasis, rather than a passing and tepid admission inserted while argument and innuendo suggest the opposite.

Be Fully Convinced in Your Own Mind (Rom. 14:5)

“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”

Again, the Bible does not require one side to change their opinion and join the other side in “disputable matters.” What the Bible requires is that we know what we’re talking about. “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” If we’re going to have an opinion, make sure it’s an informed and sound opinion. Opinions can be and often are wrong; so we need to get things right and settled through sound reason as best we can.

Everyone should be fully convinced in their own mind, but that doesn’t make every opinion equal in validity, accuracy, or helpfulness. In a lot of conversations between Christians about race and racism, the conversations are set up so that there are winners and losers and so that every opinion is seen as equally valid. But, friend, that’s a trap. There are a lot of ignorant opinions out there about race and racism. Some of the loudest people have never read a book on the disputed subject. They haven’t listened to others. The debated topic is not an area of study or expertise for them. They’re simply repeating what they heard their favorite pundit say or, worse, making up a perspective in the midst of a Twitter rant.

There’s a better way, a way that leads to acceptance and welcoming. That’s when we: (a) allow others to have their views, (b) learn from the views of others, (c) do our homework by reading multiple sources from different angles on the issue, (d) test every view by the word of God, and (e) then arrive at fully formed opinions that convince us.

Honor the Lord in Your Practice (Rom. 14:6-9)

“The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God. For no one lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end, Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”

Another temptation we face on the way to unity when there is not uniformity is the temptation to judge the motives of others. Their difference in opinion can arouse our flesh. We not only judge whether they are Christians, we add to that an assumption about what motivates them. At least, we can be tempted to tell ourselves “the other side” does not want Christ’s glory. “If they did, they would not hold that opinion, right?” the flesh asks.

As verse 7 says, “None of us live to ourselves.” We all live and die to God and for God. All of life should be lived in respect and reverence for Jesus. So whichever path you take, according to your conscience, do it giving thanks to God, knowing your life and your death belong to him. Every Christian fully convinced in his or her conscience will do or not do a thing for the same motive—to honor the Lord. We should charitably assume that of our brothers and sisters who differ with us in gray areas. We should be convinced that we ourselves are trying to honor the Lord. And we should be convinced that in these disputable matters our brothers and sisters are trying to honor the Lord.

When we look at our brother or sister who has a different view than our own on racial issues or politics or homeschooling or the country’s history, do you remind yourself that they are taking their view to honor the Lord because they live and die for him?

Think of Your Own Judgment (Rom. 14:10-12)

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

“So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.” In context, that means we will have to answer to God for the opinions we hold and the actions we take based on them. Sometimes people act as if there’s no accountability for opinions. They act as if they can think anything they wish without consequence. But the God who knows our every thought will lay those thoughts bare before the universe. We will give an account for every idle word (Matt. 12:36-37). There is no free speech before the Lord.

If we really took our own judgment seriously, we wouldn’t be worried about judging others. We would be too concerned about our own appearance before God to get too worked up about disputable matters other people believe. The question becomes: What account will I give for the thoughts and actions I hold?

Resolve Not to Be a Stumbling Block (vv. 13-16 and 20-21)

Romans 14:13-16 and 20-21 hold two ideas in tension. On the one hand, they teach that “nothing is unclean in itself.” In other words, all these things that are not sin are permissible to participate in. We have freedom to eat or not eat and to celebrate or not celebrate certain days.

On the other hand, we must recognize that we should use our freedom to express love to others. Or to use the language of verses 15 and 20, we should not use our freedom in a way that “destroys the one for whom Christ died” or “destroys the work of God.” It’s that serious. The unloving use of freedom by the one with a strong conscience actually grieves (v. 15), destroys (vv. 15, 20), and trips up (v. 21) the weaker brother or sister who does not yet understand freedom in Christ. The rules of the “weak in faith” keep them safe from freedoms they’re not strong enough to enjoy. The strong should not harm them by flaunting freedom.

There are times when the loving thing to do is to limit our freedoms so we do not undo the work of Christ in others. Is that an active principle in our conversations with church members with whom we disagree? Are we each resolved not to be a stumbling block?

But we need a qualification here: If you're the person who would try to use this "weaker brother principle" to control others, a bigger need for you is to go back to strategies 1-7 recognizing yourself as both the weaker in faith and perhaps sinfully manipulative. Why would you want to bind your brother or sister's conscience to the rules you have made for yourself when they are not your servants but God's? (See 1 Cor. 10:29b-30.)

Embrace the True Nature of the Kingdom (Rom. 14:17-19)

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."

The kingdom of God is about God the Holy Spirit working genuine righteousness, peace, and joy in a person. This is the secret to peace and edification in the church. Peace doesn't come by legalistic rules (Col. 2:20ff). Edification doesn't come by binding other people to our restrictions of conscience. Peace and edification come by living in the freedom-giving Spirit of God and receiving those who do. We will find peace with each other, and we will build each other up when each of us resolves to seek the filling of the Holy Spirit and live lives that bear the fruit of the Spirit. God accepts that kind of life and so do men and women (v. 18).

So when you think of your political and racial positions that lie in gray areas, and when you think of your conversations with others: Are you calling them to obey manmade rules, or are you calling them deeper into life with the Holy Spirit? A life of righteousness, peace, and joy.

Keep a Quiet and Clean Conscience (Rom. 14:22-23)

“The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”

Some things should be kept between the individual Christian and God. One of those things is “faith.” Paul does not mean saving faith. Here “faith” refers to matters of personal conscience—what we believe to be right or wrong where the Bible does not give us clear command or teaching. The Bible teaches we should keep those things between us and God.

When we obey the faith we have, we have no reason to blame or judge ourselves for wrongdoing. By contrast, if we do things against our conscience, against our personal “faith,” then we sin. So, if your conscience won’t allow you to vote a certain way in a disputable matter, don’t vote that way. If your conscience won’t allow you to take a particular policy position in a disputable matter, then don’t take that position.

Obey your conscience until your conscience is shaped more by the Word of God and the freedom Christ gives. This is important, because no person’s conscience perfectly overlays God’s Word. We always have need of informing and reforming our conscience according to God’s Word. So we must be committed to keeping a clean conscience, and that is work that only the individual Christian can do for him or herself.

Build Up Your Neighbor (Rom. 15:1-3)

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’”

Paul comes back to the “strong” in faith, those who don’t have a lot of rules but enjoy their freedom in matters of opinion. The strong have a unique obligation. They must be patient and accepting of the “failings of the weak.” It would be easy to say, “I’m the one that’s free; you need to get free too!” But freedom is not to be used for selfishness. Freedom is to be used to please or bless our neighbor for their good. We want to build up our neighbor in the faith—that means bearing with the weak who often don’t even know they’re weak.

Our pattern for that is Jesus. On the cross, they insulted Jesus, spat on him and mocked him—not because of his own sin but because of ours. What was Jesus doing as they reviled him? He took our reproach and judgment so we could be free through his sacrifice. That same pattern should be at work when it comes to the “strong” accepting the “weak” in the body of Christ. If we judge ourselves to be “strong,” then we should lovingly and sacrificially—like Jesus—endure and bear with the weak.

What would it look like for you to do this with someone you understand to have a weaker conscience than you do?

Make the Church’s Harmony and God’s Glory Your Explicit Goals (Rom. 15:4–6)

Unity does not last by chance. Harmonious relationships do not come with a snap of the finger. Unity and harmony require that we actively and prayerfully work for them.

In my opinion, there’s only one reason worthy enough of all the hard work it takes for weak and strong to live in unity where there is not uniformity: When we work together for unity and harmony it results in our glorifying God the Father. The greatness of God is seen, in part, through the harmony of the church. God’s glory is the ultimate goal of the Christian life. God has attached his glory to weak and strong welcoming or accepting one another despite their differences in matters of opinion.

If Honor Is My Motive

In my flesh, I care too much about my opinions and too often believe them to be correct to sacrifice them for the “lesser” views of others. And there are times when the disagreements are so sharp and the issues too important to keep me unified with those who differ.

Only when my view is dominated by the praise of the One who saved me at great cost to himself am I willing to enter into his suffering for the sake of accepting or welcoming “the other.” I need Jesus before me if I’m going to live this way. If his honor is my motive, and he is honored in the church’s harmony, then I need to apply these 12 things (and more!) to my part in maintaining unity when there is not uniformity.

How about you?

HOW TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER: AFFIRM, SHARE, AND SERVE

Most of us are familiar with the “one another” commands of the New Testament. In the study guide for *Gospel in Life: Grace Changes Everything*, Tim Keller offers a helpful taxonomy under the categories of affirming one another, sharing with one another, and serving one another. These form, he says, “nine ‘community-building practices’—specific behaviors that build Christian community.” For a more detailed unpacking of each point, see pp. 58-71.

AFFIRM

1. AFFIRM ONE ANOTHER’S STRENGTHS, ABILITIES, AND GIFTS.

- Romans 12:10: “Honor one another”
- James 5:9: “Don’t grumble against each other”
- Romans 12:3-8: Confirm the gifts of one another

2. AFFIRM ONE ANOTHER’S EQUAL IMPORTANCE IN CHRIST.

- Romans 15:7: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you”
- 1 Corinthians 12:25: “Have equal concern for each other”
- 1 Peter 5:5: “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another”
- James 2:1: “Don’t show favoritism”

3. AFFIRM ONE ANOTHER THROUGH VISIBLE AFFECTION.

- Romans 16:16: “Greet one another with a holy kiss”
- James 1:19: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak”
- Ephesians 4:32: “Be kind and compassionate to one another”
- 1 Thessalonians 3:12: “[May] your love increase and overflow for each other”

SHARE

4. SHARE ONE ANOTHER’S SPACE, GOODS, AND TIME.

- Romans 12:10: “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love”
- 1 Peter 4:9: “Offer hospitality to one another”
- Galatians 6:10: “As we have opportunity, let us do good”

5. SHARE ONE ANOTHER'S NEEDS AND PROBLEMS.

- GALATIANS 6:2: "CARRY EACH OTHER'S BURDENS"
- 1 THESSALONIANS 5:11: "ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER"
- HEBREWS 3:13: "ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER DAILY"

6. SHARE ONE ANOTHER'S BELIEFS, THINKING, AND SPIRITUALITY.

- Colossians 3:16: "Teach and admonish one another"
- Ephesians 5:19: "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs"
- Romans 12:16: "Live in harmony with one another"
- 1 Corinthians 1:10: "Agree with one another"

SERVE

7. SERVE ONE ANOTHER THROUGH ACCOUNTABILITY.

- James 5:16: "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other"
- Romans 15:14: "Instruct one another"
- Ephesians 4:25: "Speak truthfully"

8. SERVE ONE ANOTHER THROUGH FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION.

- Ephesians 4:2: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love"
- Colossians 3:13: "Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another"
- Galatians 5:25: Don't provoke or envy one another
- James 4:11: "Do not slander one another"
- Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15: Reestablish broken relationships with one another

9. SERVE ONE ANOTHER'S INTERESTS RATHER THAN OUR OWN.

- Hebrews 10:24: "spur one another on toward love and good deeds"
- Romans 15:1-2: Don't please yourself but please others
- Galatians 5:13: "Serve one another"

BROTHERS TOGETHER IN CHRIST

RAY ORTLUND JR

Intensely felt, openly demonstrated love between manly men of God—who wouldn't want to be a part of that? Three ways to create that culture in our churches:

One, “Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10). No flippant put-downs. No undercutting. Not even waiting for the next guy to make the first move and open up. But me getting out of my self-concern to lift the next man up with high honor, which is what he deserves. Doing this verbally, unashamedly, openly, gladly.

Two, “Bear with one another” (Col. 3:13). Not trying to change one another, not pressuring one another. Who appointed us to that role? Our privilege is to bear with one another’s “weaknesses and oddities, which are such a trial to our patience, . . . to break through to the point where we take joy in [the other man’s quirkiness]” (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, page 101). There is room in this non-crisis calm for every man to grow.

Three, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths but only such as is good for building up” (Eph. 4:29). Nothing could be more unAmerican than us freely denying ourselves our right of free speech. But men of God filter every word according to a higher standard. Even if the words wanting to come out of my mouth are factually true, the real question is, Are my words positively helping the man listening?

Manly men of God loving one another intensely are a life-giving social environment, that our angry world will look upon with astonishment.



A Prayer for Grace to Bear One Another's Burdens

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Gal. 6:2

Dear Lord Jesus, the call to shoulder up under the burdens of friends and family drives us to you today. Otherwise we would simply turn and walk away, just like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). There are seasons when the needs around us seem to far exceed the resources within us. Where else can we go but to you?

Lord Jesus, it's only because you bore the burden of the law's demands and judgment for us; only because you say to us, "Cast all your care upon me, for I care for you" (1 Pet. 5:7); only because you call to us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28) that we can continue to show up and shoulder the many burdens of others.

Grant us grace not to be afraid of the emotional messiness that certain burdens bring. Help us know how to rely on your presence more than we rely on mere words. Help us to understand our limits, but even more so, help us be very aware of your limitless mercy, grace, power, and peace.

We pray for friends who are struggling in their marriages—feeling hopeless, angry and spent. Bring the power of your resurrection to bear. Humble one, then the second spouse. We pray for families with children who are acting out in destructive ways—bring these kids to gospel sanity, and grant their parents wisdom, forbearance and strength. We pray for friends facing great medical challenges with diminishing health care resources—grant your healing grace, and we ask you to sovereignly move within the healthcare industry. It is just as broken as our bodies are.

We pray for our churches—restore your people to the joy of your free and glorious grace. Pour our your Spirit upon our churches, and redemptively disrupt us. Forgive us for making too much of the wrong things. Rekindle the passion of first-love relationship with you in the hearts of pastors, elders and deacons. Do beyond all we could ask or imagine in our church families, Lord Jesus.

We bring all of these friends to your throne of grace, and we will seek to fulfill “the law of Christ”—the law of love, the way of the gospel—as you give us strength, wisdom, and grace. This we pray, in your persistent and sufficient name. AMEN!

ACCEPTING ONE ANOTHER

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God. Rom. 15:7

Dear Jesus, you know everything about us, and yet you joyfully, completely, and tenaciously accept us. More so, you actually enjoy and delight in us. This is heart-humbling glorious.

For we are the self-absorbed younger son you welcome home, and the self-righteous elder son you constantly pursue (Luke 15). We’re the one lying at your feet others would stone, and hypocritical, religious rock-throwers. We’ve been up in the tree with Zacchaeus, and down in the depths with Peter. We easily see the speck in other’s eyes, and yet ignore the Redwood forest in our own. Yet you deeply, unwaveringly love us.

Thank you, Jesus, and HELP! For as you’ve accepted us, you’re calling us to accept others. There are many folk—even in the Body of Christ, with whom we strongly disagree. Though we are one in You, we are often quite divided, when it comes to theology and sociology; COVID-etiquette, and who should be president; how to raise kids, and how to spend cash. And that’s just for starters.

We need thicker grace-skin and bigger Gospel-hearts. We love well when we show kindness without compromise; and listen to learn. Teach us the difference between essential and nonessential matters, Jesus; and the difference between acceptance and acquiescence. It gets fuzzy, at times.

Free us from the limitations of our perspectives, and the prejudices of our heritages. Help us remember our Father's promise to complete his good work in us, also applies to each of his children. Burn the conviction indelibly into our hearts: It brings you great praise when we work to accept others as you accept us, Jesus. This we pray, in your matchless and merciful name. AMEN!

A PRAYER FOR BRINGING ENCOURAGEMENT TO ONE ANOTHER

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another on 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. Heb. 10:23-25

Dear Lord Jesus, as I meditate my way through this "let us" patch of gospel admonitions today, a few things jump out at me. On one hand, I'm convicted about the importance of holding onto the hope you've won for us—a living hope, an anchor of hope, a glorious hope. Our hope is certain, but I certainly need to avail myself of it—grab hold of it like my favorite fly rod or one of my beloved cameras. I ignore hope to the peril of my heart.

I'm so thankful that we don't hope in hope; we hope in you. It's not about crossing our fingers, but seeing your cross and everything you've already accomplished for us. It's about seeing our future nestled down into your merciful and mighty palms, for you've made promises you alone can keep. It's about abandoning ourselves to the advancing of your kingdom, not turning inward and guarding our little fiefdoms. You are faithful and you are loving, and that's all we really need to remember. Not hoping is not an option.

Jesus, this Scripture also convicts me about the importance of being a lot more intentional and regular in bringing encouragement to my friends, my family members, and those you put in my way. As the great Day of your return approaches—the day when all hoping in part will give way to the fullness of hope—help me to speak your words of life and hope and healing to those who need them the most.

Help me to bring your hands of mercy and grace to bear in very tangible and timely ways. Very specifically, to whom would you send me today? Put names and faces before me who need the encouragement you alone can bring. This I pray, in your loving and faithful name. AMEN!

A PRAYER ABOUT ONE BLESSING AFTER ANOTHER

The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “this was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. John 1:14-16

Dear Lord Jesus, I can understand why, of all the accounts of your birth, John’s is least often chosen as the script for Sunday-school Christmas pageants and programs. After all, what parts would the children play? What cute costumes could they wear? There’s no manger, no Joseph and Mary, no shepherds, angels and wise men and lowing cattle. But there certainly IS you. You’re the only star on the horizon in this nativity scene, and oh, how you shine.

I praise you, Lord Jesus, for becoming “flesh” and “tabernacled” among us for just the right amount of time. Though equal to, yet distinct from the Father, you didn’t consider your glory something to be tightly grasped or held onto selfishly. Rather, you emptied yourself by becoming a man—but not just any ordinary man, a servant-man, the Servant of the Lord... the second Adam, our Savior... my Savior.

In your thirty-three years of incarnate life, you accomplished everything necessary for the redemption of the people for whom you lived and died, but also for the restoration of the world you created and love. Be magnified, adored, regaled, worshiped and loved, Lord Jesus. What a wonderful merciful Savior you are! What a God who is so mighty to save!

I cannot sing Isaac Watt's great Advent hymn, "Joy to the Word," without thinking of this telling of your birth, Lord Jesus. For, indeed, you presently rule the world with your grace and truth-the the grace and truth with which you are overwhelming full. And you're making the nations prove, and you're making me prove, the wonders of your love... the wonders of your love... the wonders, the wonders of your love.

For from the fullness of your grace I keep receiving one blessing after another-one blessing on top of another. The blessings of your imputed righteousness... the blessings of perpetual favor with God... the blessings your intercession and advocacy... the blessings of your Spirit's work in my life... the blessings citizenship in heaven... the blessing of knowing the good work you have begun in me, and in the cosmos, WILL be brought to completion! Hail the incarnate deity! Joy to the world, and to me, indeed! So very Amen, I pray, in your most glorious name.

A PRAYER ABOUT ACCEPTING, NOT JUST ENDURING ONE ANOTHER

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. Romans 14:1-4

Dear Lord Jesus, most welcoming and gracious savior, I start this day with the eyes of my heart savoring the last words of this very important text. You are the Master who will cause each of your servants to stand in the day of judgment. I very much need to remember this promise—for me, and for a growing host of brothers and sisters with whom I walk and worship you.

You will complete the good gospel-work the Spirit has begun in us... as diverse as we are, living somewhere in the continuum between weak faith and strong faith—non-meat eaters and meat eaters... non-wine drinkers and wine drinkers. And these culinary issues represent just two of a myriad of issues about which we, your servants, often get turned very sideways with one another. I can hardly wrap my mind around the challengers Paul faced in helping the multi-cultural, poly-perspective, socially-complex, theologically-diverse churches of Rome sing, “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord...” Have mercy!

But, Lord Jesus, here's where I need you to help me with this very issue. Please help me recognize the difference between disputable and indisputable matters. What is clear in the Scriptures, and what is not? The line seems to get increasingly challenged, blurred or changed. I realize, and gladly accept, that about many issues, your faithful servants will disagree until the second coming of Jesus. But give us fresh humility to tremble at your Word as the court and garden in which we will have these very important discussions.

Lastly, I need you to help me know how to relate to “non-meat eating” brethren, who seem to relish the role of “vocational weaker-broker”—fault-finders, conspiracy-hunters, liberty-smashers... self-appointed prosecuting attorneys in the Body of Christ. Help me Jesus, help me know how to engage them. I really just want to avoid and run from them. And, help me know how to engage my brethren who have now turned Christian liberty into epicurean fantasies—“Eat, drink, and be merry, for we have a big gospel!” Having escaped legalism they now feel free to over indulge, dangerously so. I’m tempted to join them, Jesus, but give me real gospel-freedom and much more wisdom to love well in the Body of Christ, as I seek to do all things for your glory. So very Amen, I pray, in your holy and healing name.

Encourage, Build Others Up, and Then Encourage Them Some More

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. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. 1 Thess. 5:9-11 (ESV)

Heavenly Father, there are many things over which we don’t have any control; many outcomes that remain hidden from us, and many broken stories, broken people, and broken circumstances that may, or may not, get better this side of heaven.

But this we do know, because of the finished work of Jesus, our future contains zero judgment and 100% joyful welcome by you; zero wrath and 100% perfect righteousness in Jesus; zero brokenness and 100% perfect relationship with you. It’s all going to be, not just okay, but magnificent beyond our wildest dreams and hopes.

Until then, Father, make us genuine encouragers and “builder-uppers” of each other. Thank you for the privilege we have of bearing one another’s burdens, showing up in one another’s stories, holding one another accountable for believing the gospel, giving each other hope-fueling perspective at low times, and life-giving rebukes at wandering times.

Father, thank you that, whether we die before Jesus returns, or live to see that blessed Day, we are your beloved children, now and forever. Nothing can separate us from your love, deplete your mercies or exhaust your grace.

Thank you that the darkest clouds often bring the most refreshing rains, that boasting in our weakness is still the best way to taste your sweetness, and that none of us will ever be beyond the need or reach of your grace. Indeed, Father, free us to live as conduits of your mercy and grace, encouragement and hope as long as you keep us in this world. So very Amen we pray, in Jesus’ tender and triumphant name.