

The Art and Science of Affirmation

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[0 : 00] Well, first I want to affirm all of you for being here today, and especially if you heard I was going to be here, and you know, maybe somebody thought, well, maybe I'll stay home this week.

Well, I haven't done a lot of research into Sam Crabtree's life, but I am sure that growing up, he got kidded about his last name, especially when he was feeling crabby, and maybe that's why God inspired him to write a book about affirming people.

It would be like me being inspired to write a book about curing back pain, because my name's Aikens. Well, anyway, let's look at Romans 13, 7, which says, Pay to all what is owed to them, taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

How do we pay honor and respect? Those are two intangible things, and we can't pay them out in currency like we can for taxes, so how do we pay those things?

I think we, one serious way we can pay them is by our words, by what we say. Let's look at Philippians 4, 8.

[1 : 36] Philippians 4, 8. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise.

Worthy of praise. Think about these things. And I think things that we think that are worthy of praise ought to be praised, don't you?

If they are worth being praised, then it's a good idea to praise them. Sometimes the differences between an art and a science can get confused.

Like if I'm a musician and I'm looking into electronic music, I have to learn the difference between waveforms and wavelengths, how to operate an oscillator properly, you know, scientific things, even though that music is considered an art.

And similarly, a scientist who's trying to find a better formula might have to think more creatively outside the box, might have a flash of insight that seems more artistic than scientific.

[2 : 57] Well, the point Sam Crabtree seems to be, I won't call him crabby, Sam Crabtree seems to be making in his excellent book, is that effective affirmation is both an art and a science.

He refers to a ratio between affirmation and criticism or correction that exists in relationships.

It almost sounds like a scientific equation, like needing to use a certain number of positive things to balance out each negative thing.

But human relationships can't be reduced to a scientific formula, mathematical equation. There are differences that distinguish one person from another and one relationship from another.

We have to make allowances, for example, when dealing with a family member that we might not have to make with a colleague at work or just a casual acquaintance.

[4 : 08] So affirmation is an art as well as a science. And as in other arts that we know about, one has to learn by doing, not just book learning and reading or attending a class.

So because we want to learn the art of affirmation and practice it well, so that God is glorified and the one being affirmed is refreshed and edified, we have to have the courage to jump in and do it. And that's why this chapter is being written. It's very practical. So if you're like me, it does take courage to jump in and do it because we're basically inward focused.

It might feel strange to take the initiative and affirm people in exhibiting their, exhibiting godly qualities. We may be afraid we'll mess it up and end up sounding silly or make the person feel awkward about being affirmed.

And Sam Crabtree lists some mistakes he has made or run across in this art of affirmation, the practice of it. If we can learn from the mistakes of others, it'll be worth our time to review some of

them.

[5 : 29] He writes that this art is a lot like threading a needle with a very small eye. You know, you got your hands and maybe you're nervous about something and you try to get that thread into the eye of the needle.

If you twitch it a little to the right, you might be promoting a man-centered self-esteem. And if you twitch a little to the left, you might act like all affirmation is a kind of idolatry, like you're idolizing people.

And both of those twitches miss the eye of the needle. The thread goes through the eye when we acknowledge that a human being can be praised and should be praised, but in a way that gives honor to the maker and the gifter of that person and that quality we're praising.

One mistake, this is mistake number one, one mistake we can make at the outset is to believe that affirmation is optional. And we've talked about this before in this book.

As we all know, there are as many sins of omission as there are sins of commission. And when we see something praiseworthy in a person that's evidence of God's grace in their life, not to give praise to that person or praise about that person to somebody else is to fail giving the Lord the praise for his handiwork.

[7 : 11] Jesus said, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And James tells us in chapter 4, verse 17, he warns us, Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does it not, to him it is sin.

So we need to be careful not to think that affirmation is something we can just do or not do and feel it's fine. The more God-focused our thoughts are, the more evidences of his grace and excellent character we will see in the world around us and in the people we meet.

Paul's admonition to the Philippians to think about these things, true, honorable, just, pure, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise, should not only remain locked up in our heads, should they?

If we see things, we think about these things, we should speak up, especially if we notice these godly qualities in others. After all, the more we speak up and commend such qualities, the more likely we are to see them multiply.

Many times a better environment at work or at home or a better world can be effected by better words being spoken.

[8 : 45] From the abundance of the heart, the mouth will speak. When Jesus said that in Matthew 12, 34, he was talking about evil things.

He was giving reference to what comes up from the hearts that are evil. But the same is true of virtuous things. We tend to be so quick to criticize and complain.

How much better to let our speech be characterized by commending and affirming what's positive. When we truly admire someone's character, let us praise God in their hearing that he has gifted them something admirable.

So another mistake, number two, in our thinking might be that that affirmation is the chief thing. The chief thing.

While it's important and even necessary, the chief thing is Christ himself. Especially when we're affirming godly qualities in unconverted people, we must not think our work is over when we affirm him.

[9 : 57] More important things are prayers for this person. The words of the gospel we speak to him have much more of an impact on their eternity.

Affirmation is a matter of obedience to our good God who has shared his goodness by making humans in his image. It can also be a door into a person's heart and life through which the message of salvation and growth in Christ can have ready access.

One who readily affirms people is much more likely to find willing listeners to the good news of Jesus. Number three, although affirmation cannot be seen as optional and we can't see it as the chief goal in our witness for Christ, another major mistake we can make is to aim at greater self-esteem as the goal for our affirmations.

What we're praising in other people is not the people themselves. You have to keep that in mind as if they are the source of their own goodness.

As Jesus explained to the rich young ruler who called him good teacher, there is only one who is truly good and that is God. When we praise humans made in God's image, we aren't implying that

they deserve the praise.

[11 : 35] Rather, it's the Lord who deserves it for the grace he has been working into that life. Apart from this ultimate divine activity, all of our goodnesses, all of our righteousness is as filthy rags, Isaiah tells us.

Isaiah 64.6 1 Corinthians 4.7 asks, What made you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive?

God is good. Perfectly good. Abundantly and entirely good. And he is to be praised as the source and the provider of all goodness.

We experience good things, good relationships, good times, and good feelings, all in a secondary sense. All in a secondary sense.

Thanks to the overarching, all-consuming goodness of our good God. He alone is good in a primary sense. A sense that deserves our esteem in an absolute way.

[12 : 54] The problem with our modern culture of self-esteem is that it not only mentions God seldom, if ever, but it tends to excuse or even commend things that God condemns as sinful.

So, Kim, why are you so down on yourself? You're really not that bad. You need a positive self-image.

Guilt feelings are bad for you. You deserve better. You're just as good as most people. And Kim knows that such compliments might provide some temporary relief from sadness or depression, but they also can short-circuit some necessary pangs of conscience that God uses to lead a person to repent and turn to Christ.

Building up a sinner's self-esteem could fortify him or her against the reality of divine wrath and ultimate judgment.

after all, if I'm a person to be admired and esteemed in spite of my sin, then why would a loving God be angry with me and condemn me to hell?

[14 : 20] If I deserve a break today, why shouldn't I expect God to give me a break on judgment day? When encountering people who are struggling with conviction of sin, it isn't our job to relieve that struggle by complimenting them or belittling their guilt feelings.

It's the Holy Spirit's task to use that struggle to point them to the Savior from sin and true guilt before a holy God. It's a sinful, destructive thing to excuse or commend what God condemns and will eventually judge.

Yet many times we suppress the truth of guilt and God's wrath by minimizing the seriousness of sin, both in ourselves and in others.

Rather than portraying people as fallen and in desperate need of forgiveness, our self-esteem culture portrays them as slightly flawed, but in no danger of being judged by God, prone to making mistakes, but basically good overall.

How should we respond when somebody does share their guilt feelings with us? When it comes to fallen man's nature, there are things that can be commended, even in those who are confronting their sin.

[15 : 55] When a scribe came to Jesus to test him, he did answer one of Jesus' questions wisely, and Jesus said to him, you're not far from the kingdom of God.

If a non-believer tells us he or she is bothered by a guilty conscience, we might rightly commend their sensitivity, their honesty, their alertness to sin, even though it might not be full-blown repentance, yet, by pointing out the positive fact that they are not far from the kingdom of God, we're rightly implying that they still have further to go.

And God might be opening the door for us to lead the way forward. Sam Crabtree has an illustration of the Lincoln statue in the Lincoln Memorial.

It has a lot of similarities to the real Lincoln, but there are a lot of differences, too. And when we commend Lincoln's character, we're not commending that statue.

We're commending Lincoln himself. So, when we commend things in the sinner that are positive, that are leading him in a direction to acknowledge their sin, that can be a good thing.

[17 : 30] Okay, mistake number four. Another one that we can make with our affirmations is to imply that these glimmers of godly character are solving the sinner's guilt problem.

Okay, we have to be careful that we're not implying that these signs of character are going to make up for the sinner's guilt.

Again, Jesus Christ is the chief thing. He's the one who came to live, suffer, and die for fallen people, for sinners.

While the Lord shows his glory and positive qualities in all he has made, including fallen people, he does this in spite of the curse of our sinful corruption.

The problem is not solved by moral reform, but by faith in Jesus Christ and his atoning sacrifice, sacrifice, his perfect righteousness which justifies the sinner.

[18 : 40] Millions of religious people have fallen into the trap of trusting not in Christ alone, but Christ plus their own performance to solve their sin problem and fit them for heaven.

We can also make the mistake of overlooking the connection between affirmation and soul winning. And this has been implied in these earlier mistakes.

Commending a godly quality in a person we hope to win for Christ can serve as the spoonful! of sugar that helps the medicine of the bad news to be received before we can move on to the good news of faith in Christ, the good news of the gospel.

When Paul stood before the men of Athens at Mars Hill, he prefaced his remarks about Christ by commending their religious zeal.

If you notice, he was making the observation that even though their faith was misplaced, at least they displayed an interest in spiritual truth, showing that they were not purely materialistic in their world view, which is a good thing.

[19 : 59] we want people to think in spiritual terms, not just material ones. When you and I are seeking to open a conversation where we can share our faith, there will invariably be something positive about the person we can commend.

If we don't know it yet, just talk to the person. Find out what they're concerned about. The mere fact that you're talking to each other might mean that he or she is open or curious or punctual or flexible or interested or thoughtful.

Comment on such a quality, letting them know you appreciate it as a way God has allowed you both to discuss some important things, things that have wonderfully impacted and changed your life.

Use that as a connection between the affirmation and winning people to Christ. Number six is when we fail to see the connection between not affirming and our reputation.

Christians often have earned a reputation of being anti-this and anti-that, being naysayers and fuddy-duddies, having moral objections to all the ills of society and sinful habits of the people around them.

[21 : 36] Well, while it's right and proper, necessary to stand up against evil, it gains us more of a hearing, generally, and as individuals, when we're known for what we promote, what we commend, what we affirm, what we applaud.

Both Jesus and his apostles taught that in this world we will be hated and persecuted in spite of doing what is right and loving others as Christ has loved us.

We ought to be aware, however, of how our failure to affirm others can add to this negative reputation. just as much as being over critical of the negative things we encounter.

Crabtree observes, it's better to be hated while you're affirming than to be hated for not affirming. So see the connection between those two things.

Number seven, we can also make the mistake of abandoning a person on their way to a Christless eternity. Paul reminds us in Romans 10 that folks won't believe in Christ if they don't hear of him.

[22 : 59] And how will they hear without a preacher? Proclaiming the gospel is only possible if you and I gain a hearing for that message.

Affirmation is a natural way to gain a hearing for the gospel. And there are people in my life I sadly can look back on and admit that my relationship with them was almost entirely negative.

In effect, I have never considered them a worthy candidate for my friendship, let alone a possible convert to Christianity. By failing to look for commendable qualities I might praise in that person, I was in effect abandoning him on his way to hell.

Now I believe totally in the sovereignty of God that those he's chosen will indeed be saved whether I affirm that person or not. But God ordains the means as well as the ends of conversion and writing off people in our lives as not worthy of the effort to pursue with our affirmations is a way of forfeiting God's blessings both for myself and certainly for their eternal souls.

Now quickly, some other mistakes to avoid. Number eight, don't confuse affirmation with flattery. affirmation commends real virtues and gives credit to the creator of the person being praised.

[24 : 49] Flattery usually exaggerates that virtue for the purpose of gaining something in return. Affirmation is a free gift, trusting God to bring forth a potential harvest of Christ likeness.

flattery is usually given with strings attached, some selfish motive expecting a payoff down the road. Proverbs 29.5 says, he who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.

Number nine, don't let the moment pass. Don't let the moment pass. Act on the affirming impulse as soon as you feel it.

As soon as you think of something commendable about another person, do something about it. Even if that person isn't around, write it down as a note, send the person an email, or a text message, or even tell a third person about it.

Affirm somebody behind their back. Start a positive, true rumor through the rumor mill. instead of destructive gossip.

[26 : 07] If you let it pass, you'll forget about it. So don't let it pass. And number ten, don't squander the hearing once you gained it.

Don't squander the hearing once you gain it. People are subjected to so much trash talk and negative info pouring into their ears every day.

Once they're turned, tuned into your frequency with your affirmation, give them something worth hearing about. Point them toward valuing the valuable.

If you know the thoughtfulness, you know the thoughtfulness you've just shown to so and so, do you realize who that quality reminds me of? The most thoughtful person who ever lived, Jesus Christ.

Don't squander the hearing once you have it. Make use of it. Well, let me finish by skipping to Crabtree's final chapter and giving just a few of the hundred ideas for those who feel stuck.

[27 : 20] Suggestions of ways to affirm people in your life. And while I'm reading these, I want you to think about someone you know, maybe yourself, but you don't have to point to yourself, just talk about yourself as if you're somebody else.

I know this person who was affirmed by something. Okay, be thinking about that because I'll be opening it up for comments.

Well, number one, at a committee or board meeting before going on to the next agenda item, stop to commend those who were involved in the previous item.

That's one suggestion. Number two, compose a letter to the editor commending a character quality being demonstrated in the community.

And I added, name names. Okay, give them credit. Number three, get up out of your chair, move to another room, seek out a person, and say something like, I just came to say hi, or good morning, or have a great day, or I appreciate such and such.

[28 : 43] Number four, ask someone's advice. Better yet, ask a younger person's advice. Then take that advice and act on it.

that will affirm that person as being somebody who's worth asking advice of. Number five, resolve that before you do any work today, you will affirm a coworker or a fellow student.

Number six, write a eulogy for a person who has died, a great person who's died. sent it to somebody and say, you remind me of this person.

I like that one. Number seven, commend a worker, a McDonald's cashier, postal worker, bank teller, grocery clerk, et cetera, for smiling and being cheerful.

Number eight, search the scriptures for ways people commended others, and then go and do likewise. I just quickly, I thought of, I can't think of the example.

[30 : 02] I'll come back to it. See, you need to write these things down or you forget. Am I red?

Okay. Number nine, invite the passenger in your car to set the cabin temperature, the radio volume, and the station.

Number ten, this is a great one, make an acrostic of the person's name using a character quality for each letter. The name is Vicky, V-I-C-K-I.

She's V, virtuous, I, innovative in solving household problems, C, courageous confronter, K, kind to aging parents, and I, industrious.

Try that out on your spouse. So how do you like to be affirmed or what have you experienced or seen, heard about an affirmation that was inspirational to somebody else?

[31 : 13] Have you been thinking? Have you been thinking? Yes? Yes? I know there's in care all the times when we're in a restaurant and somebody across the aisle or the counter provides them service to make common to them.

Or sometimes it says it's going out of the grocery store and the person at the register looks so down and sad and she'll say something and she'll say something and she'll say how they respond to a kind word and all of a sudden there's a smile on the face.

I appreciate that. Carol, do you want to tell on him now? Anybody else?

We still have a few minutes. I was at a wedding and the reception afterwards and the wonderful meal was served and I saw a lady go back into the kitchen and thank them for such service.

Okay, Dan? Dan? We got the opportunity to share anything and I'll have fear or the third is probably one did about them and of course we don't And we want our kids to see what the right thing is, and it's not just the worst thing it's wrong.

[32 : 44] And it's just the worst thing, you know, and it's just the worst thing it's wrong. And it's just so clever that it's ■. Nice.

Yes. And she was a lesbian, no interest in God, but her one kind letter changed her life and brought her to Christ.

She had a lot of hate mail, she had a lot of letters of affirmation, but it was the one she couldn't throw away from a kind pastor. And that ended up, like you say, as the door to sharing the gospel.

It took courage, it took perseverance, didn't it, on the pastor's part. I mean, he held back for a lot of dinners before she had enough curiosity to ask the right questions.

And it took a lot of patience and a lot of love. Somebody else? Yeah, Sam.

[34 : 27] Yeah. Yeah.

Crabtree makes the point that a lot of times all you need to do is notice somebody. Notice their presence. Let them know you're glad they're here. A lot of times that opens up a whole new avenue.

Yeah, Keith. Well, we have a daughter and a son-in-law that have seven-year-old kids. And there's been several kids who live in restaurants.

And afterwards, someone will come by and say, we just appreciate so much how well-behaved your children are. And that encourages them, of course, but they've also got a lot of free hand.

Yeah, it can have material effects as well as spiritual.

[35 : 39] Still a few minutes. Any other? Yes. Any other thing?

thanks for sharing that yes Paul that was affirming wasn't it yes Carol yes and they're always commending for their participation and building and for singing to the Lord.

And that just encourages further growth. Great. You know, I'm just going to finish by reminding us that it's not just complimenting people. It's not just making them feel good.

It's praising God for the work He's doing in all of these things, in all of these attributes, all of these qualities, all of this character development that is not from ourselves.

It's a gift from the Lord, just like our faith. I highly recommend this book, folks. We have really just scratched the surface, these four lessons. You really should get this book and read it and digest it.

[38 : 30] It's a life-changing book. And it's very, very practical all the way through. We couldn't hardly scratch the surface.

So, get yourself a copy, Practicing Affirmation by Sam Crabtree. Let's pray. Lord, we do thank you for the way you are using authors like Sam and just the comments, the caring comments of your people as we affirm those around us.

you use these as just nuggets of gold in people's lives to inspire them to be more like Christ.

Lord, may that be our practice as we go forth from this class, as we meet together, as we look into your word. Help us to look for those examples of commendation that you use to to just show yourself in the people you have made.

We thank you for these things. In Jesus' name, Amen. I remembered, I remembered when when when was it Isaac who sent his servant to look for a wife for him.

[40 : 00] And he commended that servant by entrusting him with that kind of of job. So that's one way that scriptures show that somebody commended somebody and affirmed them.

God bless.