

Defining Christian Encouragement

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[0:00] Well, today we are going to start a new series on encouragement. We're going to be using this book, Encouragement, How Words Change Lives, by Gordon Chang.

Now, most of you probably haven't heard of Gordon Chang, so I thought I would tell you a couple of things about him to begin. He's an Anglican Reformed minister from Sydney, Australia. He does the majority of his work with college students, but he's worked with other people, of course. He's married with three children, and so for the next nine weeks, he's going to be taking us, eight or nine, nine or ten, I'm not sure exactly how long we're going to go.

He's going to be taking us through the study on how to encourage one another. How to encourage one another. And I'm sure that there's basically two responses when I told you that we're going to be talking about encouragement.

Two responses in this room. Some of you who are naturally cheerful were probably thinking, yes, this is, I like this. You think, wonderful.

[1:13] This is the sort of thing that we need to hear. And you're the natural cheerleaders in our life and in our world. You have a natural sunny disposition. You're the eternal optimist.

Every cloud has a silver lining. Maybe you think you don't really need this, but other people do. Then the other basic response is probably, uh-oh.

When you think of encouragement, you think of those peppy cheerleaders. And if there's anything that drives you crazy, it's those peppy cheerleaders that are always looking on the bright side of life. When obviously, who are they kidding? The glass is half empty if you really look at it. And every silver lining has a cloud, doesn't it? For you.

And so when you're thinking about saying a whole book on encouragement, you're probably suspecting or you suspect that this is sort of all cliché.

[2:13] It's already been worked over. What really more can we say? Well, you know, those are the extremes. And hopefully, we're all somewhere in the middle of that.

But the thing is, is both of those views aren't completely wrong. Encouragement really does come out of who you are. And so the naturally cheerful person is far more natural for them to encourage and try to cheer other people up.

Because genuine encouragement does come out of who you are. It's not pretending. It's not fake. It's not artificial. This artificial cheerfulness. And what we're going to see is that encouragement doesn't just come out of who we are by nature.

It comes out of who God has made us in the gospel. It comes, the gospel makes encouragement possible.

And not only possible, but inevitable. For the rest of our lives, we shouldn't be these pessimistic, cynical sorts of people. Our Lord Jesus reigns.

[3:27] He saved us from sin. And so there is a basic and solid reason for all of us to be encouraged and to encourage. But on the other hand, this whole idea of encouragement has really been probably overused in some circles.

It's cliché in a lot of circles. And so I'm more cynical maybe than some people. And so I can relate to those people who are thinking, what is this going to do for me?

I mean, maybe you're worried that this is some sort of like live your best life now kind of book, kind of thing. But I assure you, it's not.

It's not some sort of glib, peppy, chipper kind of encouragement. Encouragement is something that God calls us to do. It's a command.

It's a privilege. It's something that we actually join God in doing. We're going to see that. It's something that we all need to do. Whether we're naturally happy or naturally gloomy,

encouragement is really this amazing thing when we understand it.

[4:37] That we are going to be speaking the very words of God into a person's life. It's amazing when you understand what it is.

And so that's what we're going to talk about today. Encouragement. What is Christian encouragement? How does it differ from just any sort of other encouragement? Well, let's talk about what it's not first.

What encouragement is what it isn't? Encouragement is not about a naturally optimistic person using their natural gifts to make others feel better.

So it's not just something natural that optimistic people take part of it. That's part of it, no doubt. But that sort of leaves all of the Eeyores, you know, the gloomy people, out in the rain.

And God wants encouragement to be coming from every part of the body of Christ. It's something that he calls the whole body, the whole church to, not just sort of the optimistic part, ministers to the pessimistic part.

[5:43] And so this study isn't about convincing happy people to make other people happy. That's not what it's about. On the other hand, the study is not about making gloomy people, or at least that side of things, you know, say awkward or uncharacteristic things to cheer people up.

So I'm not going to be cajoling you or, you know, twisting your arm for you to say these kind of strange, awkward things that really, that's not who you are necessarily.

Now, thankfully, encouragement really isn't either one of those things at its heart. Instead, encouragement, this is very important, encouragement belongs to that theme, that very important theme that we find over and over again in the Bible.

And that is the power of God's Word to change people. It belongs under that. Encouragement rests on top of this idea that God's Word has power by the Spirit to change people's lives.

And so encouragement isn't about happy people making other people happy or gloomy people acting all strange and trying to make other people happy. It's something greater than that.

Encouragement is the practical application of that great truth that God's Word has changed me and it can change you.

[7:16] Now, next week we're going to explore that whole theme in a lot more detail. But today I want to focus on nailing down a definition for what Christian encouragement is.

And we're going to look at two passages in the Scripture that talk about encouragement. And at the end we're going to sort of gather all those ideas up and give you a definition. Now, the first passage is Ephesians chapter 4 verse 15.

So I'm going to ask you to turn there to Ephesians chapter 4 verse 15. Now, we're going to just read this verse and then a little bit later we're going to read the entire context to see what the context brings to bear on this verse.

But this is the heart of it. Ephesians 4 verse 15. It says this. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ.

Okay, so before we look at the wider context, we're going to look at just this phrase. Speaking the truth in love.

[8:29] Something God wants us to do. Paul tells us to do. And so first, God tells us to speak the truth. What are we supposed to be speaking to each other?

Well, it's the truth. Now, the key thing to understand and realize is Paul is not necessarily contrasting the truth from lies. He's not saying instead of lying to one another, speak the truth.

I mean, I think that's part of it. But that's not all of it. First and foremost, when Paul speaks about truth, he's talking about what lines up with the facts of the Bible.

But specifically, he's talking about the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we can see this. That's how Paul uses the word truth in Ephesians.

So turn back to Ephesians chapter 1 verse 13. Ephesians 1 verse 13. He says this. So Paul equates truth, the word of truth, with the gospel of your salvation.

[9:46] The gospel of what Jesus has done to save sinners. Or go over to Ephesians chapter 4 verse 21. Ephesians 4 verse 21. Ephesians 5 verse 21.

The gospel. We're to speak the gospel to each other. The gospel isn't just something for beginner Christians. The gospel is what we are to speak to one another all the time so that we grow.

So I have an easy enough question for you. And I want you to participate. What is the gospel? What does it include? That's a question for you.

What is the gospel? It's easy enough. I understand that. I'm not looking for anything super profound. Okay. It's encouragement. It's the truth. It's reality.

What else is the gospel? What's included in the gospel? What's included in the gospel? Our way to salvation. We need to be saved. And the gospel tells us how. Mark. Okay.

[11:11] God's love. God's love is in the gospel. And the need to believe is part of the gospel message. What else are we talking about?

Karen. Hope. It's hope. Why is it full of hope? The cleansing of our sin. We talked about that in the memory verse. What else is the gospel?

Our sins have been cleansed. Jackie. Yeah. Before the gospel is anything else, it's the record of Jesus' birth, life, and death, resurrection, ascension.

It's the story, the message, of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, and ascension. And so, that's part of what we're supposed to be speaking to each other.

We're not supposed to look at those things as old dusty facts of history. They're supposed to have a living reality in the body of Christ, that we're talking about what Jesus has done, and what that means.

[12:15] What else is included in the gospel? Right. Our sin is the black backdrop that the gospel comes in. It's a very artificial, sort of flim-flam gospel, that just doesn't include sin, or guilt, or condemnation.

It's not a very powerful, good gospel. Right. From first to last, the gospel is this power of God to save us. What else is included in the gospel?

Dennis. Ah. Double imputation. He takes our sins, we get his righteousness. This glorious thing that we're justified, we're declared righteous, because he bore our sin, and we get his righteousness, his obedient life.

Mike. Okay. Okay. Christ is our wisdom, 1 Corinthians says, or 2 Corinthians. What else?

There's more. Okay. Yeah. There's something about sovereignty, God's wrath displayed. And also we see his wrath on the cross.

[13:29] This is what sin, this is what is due sin, and this is what was due to me, and Jesus took it for me. Yes, there. Yes.

Freedom from sin, freedom from fear, fear of others, freedom from condemnation, from guilt. Okay. Okay. The gospel is this message that, of light, of sunshine, as opposed to darkness.

Rex. Okay. Right. Jesus is our law keeper. He is righteous because he obeyed God's law.

We've all fallen far short of it. It includes justification, glorification, that one day we are going to be like Jesus.

That is good news. It includes adoption, that we're brought into God's family, and he gives us the spirit of adoption. And we have that same sort of intimacy, and fellowship that Jesus had.

[14:33] We cry out, Abba, Father, just like Jesus did. There's promises, God's election, God's preserving us.

It's the gospel. It's all that, that we were just talking about. Freedom, Jesus' life, his death, justification, all those things. Paul is saying, speak the truth.

Speak all that sort of thing, to each other. That's what encouragement is. It's speaking the truth in love. Encouragement is about the gospel.

It's not about, hey, cheer up, let's look on the bright side of life. It's grounded in something far better than just, you know, the shaky happiness of chipper people.

It's the gospel. Now, I have a question. Who needs the gospel? Who needs the gospel? Evie does.

[15:39] Jason does. Everyone. Believers need the gospel, Paul is saying. We need to hear and believe and understand and trust again and again the gospel.

Who else needs the gospel? It's not. Unbelievers. Believers and unbelievers. It's not something that we, so encouragement is not just something that we should be doing for our, just our brothers and sisters.

Encouragement involves speaking the gospel to unbelievers and encouraging them to repent and believe. So we're going to talk about sin and wrath and guilt and condemnation and freedom.

We're going to be speaking these things and encouraging the unbelievers to believe. And so it's something they need to hear. It's for their good.

Now, Paul says something else. He says, we need to speak the truth in love. So, it's not only the truth, but it's the way we do it.

[16 : 40] We say it in love. We speak it in love. I have a question. Why does Paul say that? Why must we speak the truth in love?

There's a variety of reasons. Right. So, actually, you don't speak the truth unless you speak it in love.

Because you're, at the heart, this truth is good news for sinners. That God demonstrates His own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And so, if we don't say the gospel in a loving way, we're actually, we're not saying the gospel at all. We're not conveying it in a, in a, in a way that lines up with the gospel. So, if our method is harsh and condemning, we're betraying the very words that we're saying.

[17 : 45] So, it's sort of like our, our body language is saying something totally opposite than what our mouths are saying. So, it's like my hands are in my pocket and I'm yawning and slouching in my chair and I'm saying, I'm so excited.

excited. Well, obviously, you're not excited. And there's something wrong when we speak the truth in a way that's harsh and condemning because the message of, that we're really speaking is the message that there is hope for sinners.

There. That, that's interesting because in the Bible, there, there is, there's the opposite for love and it's fear.

Perfect love drives out fear. That's an interesting thing. So, when we're sort of speaking the gospel in half-measure terms where it's sort of good news, that doesn't line up with the gospel either.

On either side, if they're not as bad as the Bible says or the good news is not as good as the Bible says, that's because, and we're, we're narrowing it down because of fear, we're not speaking the truth and we're not speaking it in love.

[18 : 57] Jim, you go along with what Dair said, Pastor, that's, I've been in that same situation, that's where we need more wisdom. James tells us that many of us lack wisdom. Well, I lack wisdom in presenting the truth in a way that's helpful to the person, yet please support it and it's done in a right way.

Because like I said earlier, there's a right way and a wrong way to do it and I definitely need wisdom of doing it where please support it and it's edification for them and encourage them. Right. And I think that's probably what you just said at the very end, that's for edification.

I mean, so whatever we're aiming at, and sometimes our truths that we're saying, they're like the part of the gospel that maybe we're talking about at that point, it's not just going to make them jump for joy when we're talking about sin and their need for a savior or even when we're talking among believers and pointing out a weakness, a sin that they have and their need for Jesus in this area. It's for edification and that's part of love. Now, we're going to expand this. Let's go up to verse 11, Ephesians chapter 4 verse 11, and we're going to read through this whole passage and we're going to ask just sort of what else, what does the context tell us about, about this idea of encouragement? So, verse 11, it was he, again, this is Jesus, it was Jesus who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service until we all reached unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

[20 : 47] Then, we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men and their deceitful scheming.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ. From him, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work.

So, Paul begins this passage by talking about apostles and prophets and teachers and pastors and he ends up talking about the whole body speaking the truth to one another in love.

What's the connection? How did he get from one point to the other? I mean, what do those two things have in common? The roles of prophets, preachers, teachers, et cetera, apostles, and the whole body speaking the truth to one another.

They have the same purpose. We're going to talk about that in a little bit. The same purpose.

What's the work of the apostles, pastors, prophets, teachers?

[22:08] What's their primary role? To preach the gospel. Now, they do it publicly. And the apostles, prophets, they do it authoritatively from God's hand.

So, they do it differently. Even pastors, we do it publicly. But, it's not something totally different than what the body is doing.

We're speaking the truth in love. Our job is to proclaim Christ, to speak the gospel to one another together. And, so, I'm to be about the business of speaking about Jesus to you publicly.

And you are to be about the business of speaking about Jesus one another as every part does its work. And so, where is it all going?

Well, we saw, Mark brought it up, verse 13, until we all reached unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

[23:18] And then, in verse 16, where, or verse 15, at the end, all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ. So, Paul's work, the point of speaking the truth, is to make people to be Christ-like, to reach that fullness of being like Christ.

And in verses 15 and 16, there's a similarity there. So, we're talking about, now we're talking about everyone speaking the truth. And, the idea, is that you do it to be Christ-like.

You want people to be like Jesus. Now, this is what God is after. This is what God does. He's working towards it every day in all of our lives as believers.

So, listen to Romans 8, 28, 29. And we know that in all things, God works together, works for the good of those who love him, who have been called, according to his purpose.

For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. Did you hear that? To be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that we might be the first, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

[24:35] God intends for Jesus to have a whole family of brothers that look just like the elder brother. And so, everything happens to advance that cause.

And one of those things that God uses to advance that cause is encouragement. Now, that should clue us into something. That the idea is that the target is Christlikeness.

That should clue us into the fact that sometimes encouragement doesn't immediately make another person happy. Or happier.

sometimes being conformed to Christ's image doesn't make life easier or better. Sometimes being conformed to the image of Christ means there's a sword introduced into your family.

And if you've experienced that, you're not going to be floating on cloud nine all the time. And sometimes being conformed to the image of Christ means your marriage becomes strained.

[25:46] And some people are just naturally they have the disposition of being more morose and sad. And for them, being like Jesus is not just going to suddenly change their mood in a hurry.

But we have to see that when we're talking about encouragement, that isn't God's target. That isn't our target. chipper, happy people is not the bullseye.

The bullseye is Jesus. We want to speak the truth so that people are like Jesus. We've put our trust in Him. Now we want to be like Him.

Now, there's a second passage that we need to get to. Hebrews chapter 10. Hebrews chapter 10. And verse 19.

We're going to read 19 through 25. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, open for us through the curtain that is His body.

[27:02] And since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess for He who promised is faithful.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

Now, again, do you see the connection between encouragement and the gospel? Before he gets to the part about encouragement, he's talking about the gospel, of how now we have consciences sprinkled, cleansed.

We have access to God through Jesus Christ, through His body, His blood, His death, His sacrifice. We come to God. And so, encouragement is grounded in these gospel realities and then, he says,

now encourage one another.

And there's something that's supposed to add intensity and urgency to our encouragement. Did you see what it is? The day approaching.

[28:29] There's a day approaching. So, the great day of judgment and that's final deliverance. It's final deliverance and it's final judgment and destruction.

And so, it's our great and final salvation. That day is coming and that day is supposed to intrude on this day. That part of the gospel is to intrude on this day and to give us urgency as we speak to one another.

Now, that day is a great day. It's a great day of disaster. It's a great day of salvation. And so, if you knew an earthquake, a giant, cataclysmic earthquake was going to hit Indiana tomorrow, you would probably live a little bit differently, wouldn't you?

You probably wouldn't go home and eat pizza and veg out in front of the TV, would you? You'd stock up water, you'd probably take all your valuables out, I don't know, you might fill up your gas tank and get out of here.

The thing is, is disaster changes priorities. You don't do things different when the disaster is coming. And brothers and sisters, a disaster is coming over the whole earth.

[29:45] A great day of judgment and we're going to be there and it will come upon us all. And if we aren't faithful to the end, that's the message of Hebrews, if you're not faithful to the end, it will be better for you that you were never born than to go through that.

And so in light of that, encourage one another. So encouragement is about, isn't it, it's not about chipper people making other people happy. It's about getting ready for the great day of the Lord when we'll all be judged.

So we're going to put it all together and I have a long definition if you want to write it, that's fine. I'll repeat it. Christian encouragement is speaking the truth in love with the aim of building Christians up in Christ-likeness as we wait for the day of judgment.

Christian encouragement will likewise involve speaking the truth in love to unbelievers, thus encouraging them to put their trust, to put their trust in Christ for the forgiveness, for forgiveness and salvation.

So we gather all those things up. Christian encouragement is about speaking the truth in love, it's about building up Christians, that's the aim, and a Christ-likeness as we wait for the day of judgment.

[31:18] And it's not something we just do for believers, it's something we do for unbelievers, we speak the truth in love into their lives and encourage them to put their trust in Christ for forgiveness and salvation.

And so that means that encouragement is not something that's just reserved for professional Christians, for pastors, for ministers, Sunday school teachers, it's for everyone who's been gripped by the grace of God.

If God has worked so powerfully in you, then encouragement inevitably has to flow out. The realities of the gospel are so strong, they will change the way we speak to one another.

And that's what encouragement boils down to. We are dismissed. We are dismissed.