

Encouragement (Part 1)

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Genesis 3:8-10

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Hebrews 10:19-25

ENCOURAGEMENT:

WHY WE NEED TO ENCOURAGE

I.

When I was single and an assistant pastor in Massachusetts, I was involved in leading a Bible study at one of the county jails. As Christmas season came around, I was not planning to be with my extended family. One of the prisoners in my Bible study was looking for someone to take him out on furlough on Christmas day. Back in those days nonviolent offenders in some circumstances were able to get holiday furloughs. I don't know that any correctional systems allow that any more.

This particular prisoner was a single guy in his early twenties. An elder in my church who also did prison ministry invited me over for dinner on that day. He was happy to have me bring this guy along.

After spending most of the day with this Christian family I brought my charge to his family's house near Boston. It took me about sixty seconds to gain understanding about why my friend was in trouble with the law. There was no father around. The mother greeted me nicely enough. But soon she started swearing at my friend. There were younger brothers and sisters around. Soon she was swearing at them. Everybody was yelling at each other. Evidently this was the normal dynamic in this family. It was obvious that my friend never got much encouragement or positive affirmation in this home.

I am convinced from my study of the Bible, confirmed by experience in life, that the two deepest psychological needs that all of us human beings have are significance and security. We need to know that we have some importance in the world, and we need to know that we have some kind of security. If these two needs are not met, we will have problems.

The most important source of that security and significance is the God who made us. In practical terms much of that security and significance is conveyed through people, and it is conveyed by means of encouragement. As we have heard read to us from Hebrews #10, we Christians have a responsibility to encourage one another.

I am going to be gone on a couple of Sundays in the next month. So I have in mind to do a brief topical study on the subject of encouragement. Then in September I am planning to move from the New Testament to the Old Testament and go through the Book of Jonah, looking at the story of this prophet. Today we are going to consider why we all need encouragement. The next Sunday that I am here we will consider how we can be effective encouragers. (PROJECTOR ON--- ENCOURAGEMENT KEY TO CARING) The source of some of my thoughts is a book entitled *Encouragement: Key to Caring*, which is written by a Christian psychologist by the name of Larry Crabb.

II.

Let's begin by looking at Roman numeral II in the outline and considering this thesis: HUMANITY'S PROBLEM IS SIN. (II. HUMANITY'S PROBLEM IS SIN) That is a foundational teaching of the Bible. One clear statement of that spiritual truth is found in Romans #3 v. 23. There the Apostle Paul (ROMANS 3:23) writes, "**...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...**"

Genesis #3 describes how sin first entered into the world. God told Adam and Eve that they could eat fruit from any tree in the Garden of Eden except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan came along and tempted Eve to eat from that tree. She ate from it and convinced Adam to do the same. Thus sin entered into the world. The teaching of Jesus and the argument of the Bible as a whole is based upon the claim that this is not just a story, but that it was an event that happened in history.

A.

In vv. 8 & 9 God confronts Adam and Eve about their sin. In v. 10 (GENESIS 3:10) Adam responds, "**I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid...**" Sin produces an emotional reaction. THE EMOTION THAT RESULTS FROM SIN IS FEAR. (II. A. THE EMOTION THAT RESULTS...)

Before this incident Adam and Eve surely knew and experienced respect and reverence for God. But it is only when they ate from the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that they came to know the meaning of fear.

At that point Adam and Eve were brought face to face with the profound questions of life that have confronted their descendants ever since. Will I be accepted by God? Is there hope for my future? Does my life have meaning and purpose? Will people around me accept me? The common element in all of these questions is fear.

Disobedience to God--- sin--- produces fear. As a result of this first sin the Bible says that each of us human beings has received a sin nature. This sin nature influences us to sin, and this sin produces in us

the negative emotion of fear. Unless we are reconciled to God, fear may become the governing emotional energy of our lives. But even if we become rightly related to God, we may still have fears.

I have not had any of these dreams in a long time, but for years after I graduated from seminary I had dreams in which I found myself about to graduate, or about to finish the semester, when I found out that there was a major assignment due, or a test about to be given, which I had forgotten about. The assignment was not done, or I was unprepared for the test. I would wake up from these dreams being filled with fear and anxiety. After being involved in the educational system for twenty years I developed a fear of being found academically unacceptable, of being rejected. That fear stayed with me for a long time.

B.

This emotional fear often has a specific form. Notice more of what Adam said in v. 10 (GENESIS 3:10) of Genesis 3: **"I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked..."** Adam felt unacceptable. He feared rejection, of being found naked by God. Thus THE SPECIFIC FEAR IS OFTEN REJECTION. (II. B. THE SPECIFIC FEAR IS OFTEN REJECTION.) The ultimate fear of many people is fear of rejection by God.

There is good reason for this fear. People have an innate realization that there is something unacceptable about themselves, and there is. It is called "sin." Sin is the violation of the standards of behavior of the God who created us and who holds us accountable. Unless we find a remedy for our sin, God will ultimately reject us. Fortunately God has provided us salvation from sin and its consequences through faith in Jesus Christ.

Even though we may have received the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus, we Christians still at times have fear of rejection. We may fear that our parents will reject us. We may fear that our children will reject us. We may fear that our friends will reject us. We may fear that our pastor will reject us. The pastor may fear that his congregation will reject him. We may fear that our husband or wife will reject us. We may fear rejection because of the way that we look. We may fear rejection because of our behavior. Sometimes we may fear that God will reject us.

As we go through life, we have experiences that aggravate these fears. We experience failures and rejections, at least we interpret these events as being failures or rejections. We have seen our parents get divorced, and we interpret that as rejection by one or both of the parents. Psychologists generally say that many children, especially younger children, interpret divorce as a kind of personal rejection. They often interpret divorce between their parents as a failure on their part.

Gordon was a junior high kid in my youth group years ago. His parents went through a divorce, and he ended up with the father. His father came to me at one point and offered to pay me to raise his son. It seems that dad had acquired a girl friend who did not like having Gordon around. What kind of fear and sense of rejection do you suppose that this produced in this poor kid?

When I was in the sixth grade, I went out for the school basketball team. I was the youngest boy in my grade, and I was not the most coordinated guy in the class. My father did not play basketball, and I was the oldest brother. No one had really taught me the fundamentals of the game. But I wanted to play. Unfortunately the coach did not really teach everyone the fundamentals. He was more interested in giving attention to the better players and was more concerned about winning.

Toward the end of the season I got to play in one of the official games. I had played for only a couple of minutes when the coach took me out, and he was angry with me. He yelled, "Hedlund, you were terrible. You were running around like a chicken with your head cut off." That was probably true, but it was not a helpful thing to say. Even though I had a certain enjoyment of the game, I decided not to play basketball on the team the next year. I was afraid of being rejected, of being found unacceptable.

I do not claim to understand all of the dynamics of PTSD but I am suspicious that one factor that is involved with at least some of our troops who come home from the battlefield is a fear of rejection, of being found unacceptable. If the truth was known, perhaps some of the bullets that I fired, the artillery shells that I lobbed, the bombs that I dropped killed innocent people. If the naked truth was known, it might be revealed that I am responsible for the deaths of innocent people. Perhaps if I had been a better soldier, if I had been more alert, my fellow platoon member would not have been killed. If the truth was known, I might be rejected and found unacceptable--- by God, by my fellow soldiers or by my fellow countrymen whom I have sworn to defend. If I do not sign up for another tour, perhaps fellow GIs will die because they don't have the experience and the combat knowledge that I have acquired. I would be responsible for their deaths.

C.

Because we are imperfect and sinful creatures, we experience an emotion of fear. This specific fear is often a fear of rejection, a fear of being found unacceptable. Our natural motivation is to avoid rejection. In order to avoid rejection we develop a strategy. When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, he became fearful of rejection by God. His motivation came to be to avoid rejection by God. Verse 10 (GENESIS 3:10) of Genesis #3 describes the strategy he used to avoid rejection: "**I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.**" We humans are inclined to hide ourselves from being rejected. So THE STRATEGY OFTEN USED TO AVOID REJECTION IS TO HIDE OURSELVES. (II. C. THE STRATEGY OFTEN USED...)

Adam feared rejection from God, and he chose the strategy of trying to physically hide his nakedness from God. We hide in order to deal with fear of rejection in other ways. I avoided rejection by not going out for the basketball team the next year. I have someone in my extended family who had a problem with stuttering. In social situations, many of which he tried to avoid, he tended to be quiet. Some people thought that he was cold and aloof. The real story was that he had a stuttering problem, and he had a fear of being rejected socially. I suspect that he had experiences as a child when other kids made fun of him for that, and consequently his fears of rejection were aggravated.

Most of us have at least a little bit of fear from being in social situations, especially in social situations that are new to us. At the root of our fear is often the fear of being rejected by other people, of being found unacceptable. Some people will respond by being shy and quiet, like my stuttering relative. Others may respond by being loud and noisy, by laughing a lot, by seeking to be the life of the party. The hope may be that this boisterous behavior will bring acceptance rather than rejection.

Some Christians are sensitive to how far short they fall from God's standards, and from the standards of other Christians. To avoid rejection from other Christians some of these people may adopt a strategy of being critical toward fellow believers. By pointing out the shortcomings of other Christians they hope to gain acceptance for themselves. Some will almost delight in finding out about the failings of other Christians.

Others may seek to hide from fear of rejection by other people by seeking money or fame or power. If I have a lot of money, if I have success in my career, if I have a position of power--- inside or outside of the church--- then people won't be able to reject me. I will have to be accepted. I will be safe. I will have security because I have money that will protect me, and I will have significance because money brings power and importance--- so goes our conscious or unconscious thinking.

I had a conversation with a small business owner a week and a half ago. He was sharing with me that he was bullied as a student in school. He had dyslexia, and he had challenges academically. But after high school he worked hard and developed his own business and soon was making a lot more money than those guys who had bullied him. I sensed that this business success had given him a certain protection from rejection.

Even as Christians we still may have fears--- fears of rejection by other people and sometimes fears of rejection by God. In order to cope with these fears we often develop strategies to hide from rejection. We build layers around ourselves to hide from these fears.

In a church setting one danger is that these strategies can produce a superficial community, a layer-to-layer fellowship. When we get together, we protect ourselves from each other. In our conversations we

avoid anything that would make us vulnerable to rejection. We stick to topics like politics or sports or clothes or school or children. We learn what behaviors and conversations are appropriate in our particular church culture.

But perhaps some of us are not into sports, and we maybe have different political views and our code of behavior may be different than others. Perhaps we don't have children, and perhaps we come from a different cultural background. Even if we fit in with the particular culture of the Christian community, perhaps we don't get into deeper, meaningful relationships. Perhaps we seldom penetrate the surface of Christian lives and don't address the fears that we have below the surface.

III.

So we want to consider the solution to this situation. GOD'S SOLUTION IS ACCEPTANCE. (III. GOD'S SOLUTION IS ACCEPTANCE) This is the answer to the problem of sin and our resulting fears of rejection.

A.

The most important acceptance involves being accepted by the God who is there. We really are sinners who are not acceptable before a holy God. DIVINE ACCEPTANCE COMES THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST. (III. A. DIVINE ACCEPTANCE COMES...)

By faith in Him we can become acceptable to the one Authority in the universe who matters the most. The Bible tells us in Romans #8 v. 1 (ROMANS 8:1), "**There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**" When we are connected to Jesus, we never have to fear that we will be rejected by God.

The Apostle Paul tells us additionally in Romans #5 v. 1 (ROMANS 5:1), "**Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.**" The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ was God who became man. He lived a sinless life. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. He rose again from the dead to demonstrate that He really was God. Now we are told that we can have peace with God by trusting in this Jesus. We can be justified, or declared righteous, as a result of faith in Him. We have divine acceptance. We become part of His family, and He becomes our perfect, loving Father.

B.

After that divine acceptance is established, OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO FELLOW CHRISTIANS IS ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER. (III. A. B. OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO FELLOW...) The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews was writing to Jewish Christians who were persecuted by their fellow Jews

for their conviction that Jesus was the Messiah. This persecution tempted them to leave their Christian fellowship and return to traditional Judaism. The Jewish Christians were under a lot of pressure, and they were afraid. They had fears of rejection by their family members, by their employers, by their friends and by their co-workers.

In v. 25 of #10 the author describes what a Christian's responsibility (HEBREWS 10:25) is in such situations: **"...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."** The problem is fear of rejection, in this case by fellow Jews. That rejection might mean loss of a job, alienation from family members, expulsion from the synagogue and/or rejection by friends. God's solution, at least part of the solution, is encouragement by Christians of one another.

There are two primary ways in which the Greek word for "encouragement" is used in the New Testament. Sometimes it has the meaning of "to exhort, to challenge." In Philippians #4 v. 2 (PHILIPPIANS 4:2) Paul says, **"I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord."** The Greek verb here has a strong sense of calling for action or change. These two ladies are called upon to straighten things out.

Last week we saw in 2 Thessalonians #3 that Paul called upon Christians who were lazy to get to work. (2 THESSALONIANS 3:12) In v. 12 he said, **"Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living."**

The word "encourage" is also used in the Greek New Testament in the sense of "comfort." In 2 Corinthians #1 the Apostle Paul uses that same Greek word (2 CORINTHIANS 1:3), saying in our translation, **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, (2 CORINTHIANS 1:4) who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."** So the word "encouragement" in the New Testament involves the idea of comfort and/or the idea of exhortation.

Verse 24 of Hebrews 10 adds one other thought to the use of the term "encouragement" in our text. (HEBREWS 10:24) It says, **"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works..."** Then v. 25 (HEBREWS 10:25) adds, **"...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."**

Our goal then as Christians is to demonstrate love and to perform good deeds. Sin hinders that. For it produces fear, fear of rejection from God and from other people. The method by which we can help other Christians to overcome that fear is encouragement, which involves both exhorting and comforting.

C.

What kind of atmosphere do we want whereby we can stimulate this encouragement to take place? Some have suggested that what we need is total openness. We need to create an atmosphere in which people can share everything that they are thinking and feeling without being afraid of rejection. Traditionally the family has been a place like that. No matter what you say, you can count on the fact that your family members will love and accept you.

What I am suggesting here, however, is that ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER DOES NOT REQUIRE TOTAL OPENNESS. (III. C. ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER DOES NOT...) Many of us today come from broken and fragmented families. Some of us live far away from our extended families. Some of us have families who do not understand and accept our Christian convictions. So we seek out churches or Christian groups where we can find that acceptance and a commitment to an atmosphere of total openness.

There are very positive things about a group committed to total openness, if we can find such a group. But there are dangers if you find a group of Christians who take that to an extreme. If I am totally open and honest about every feeling and thought that passes through my mind, I am going to say things like, "That really is a pretty stupid joke. Besides that, this is about the fourth time that I have heard it this week." Or I might say, "Boy, you have been putting on weight lately, haven't you?" Or "Let's draw this conversation to a close. I'm getting pretty bored listening to you." Those kinds of statements may reflect total openness, but they hardly reflect love.

Too much of an emphasis on total openness is going to produce hurt feelings and divisions and anger. Openness can become a self-centered approach to life where my focus is upon my feelings and my thoughts and my desires and my need for acceptance and security and significance. We can lose our focus and dependence upon God. We can also lose our focus upon the needs of other people.

D.

God's solution to our problem of fear of rejection is encouragement in an atmosphere, not of total openness, but of total commitment. ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER DOES REQUIRE TOTAL COMMITMENT. (III. D. ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER DOES...) Biblical encouragement means not exhibiting ourselves to one another but rather demonstrating Jesus Christ to one another in an atmosphere of total commitment to one another.

Hebrews #10 v. 24 says that we are to consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not to consider how we can use other people to calm our fears. Our focus is to be on others, not on ourselves. Because all Christians are part of God's family, we are to be committed to one another.

Ephesians #4 v. 29 (EPHESIANS 4:29) tells us, "**Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.**" It is good to have a certain openness about ourselves. But more important than openness is love for other people. Our desire to have our fears relieved and our needs met is to be balanced by a concern for other people. We are to think about saying things that give grace to people around us, that encourage others.

If a major problem that we human beings have is fear of rejection, then as Christians we should seek to quiet the fears that our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ have, to show acceptance. (PROJECTOR OFF) We should do that by sharing Jesus Christ and how He is working, and has worked, in our lives. That will involve a certain openness about our own hurts and fears and problems. But love means not being absorbed with our own fears, but looking for the opportunity to encourage others.

So with the relative in my extended family who stuttered, I am not to think, "He acts cold toward me. I don't want to talk to him, because I am afraid that he may be cold toward me and will reject me." Instead I am to think, "He acts cool and shy toward me and toward other people because he stutters and because he fears that he may be rejected socially. Therefore I will talk to him. I will show that I accept him unconditionally. I will demonstrate by my actions that he is a significant person because of who he is in Christ. I will not reject him because of a speech problem."

That is a comforting kind of encouragement. The exhortation kind of encouragement is also to take place in an atmosphere of total commitment. If I have a close friend who gets fired from his job for some reason, and he stops coming to church for a while, I have a responsibility to exercise the exhortation kind of encouragement. I might be suspicious that he is embarrassed about the fact that he got fired from his job, and that he does not want to risk embarrassment and uncomfortableness in talking about it to people at church.

If my analysis is accurate, the underlying problem is that my friend fears rejection from fellow church members. I have a responsibility to exhort him to go to church, and I also have a responsibility to assure him of my support and the support of other people at church. Hopefully the other people at church will indeed be supportive and not judgmental. For they also have a responsibility to be loving toward him.

If our responsibility is to encourage others, how will we be encouraged? Who will help us to deal with our own fears of rejection--- our own fears about insecurity and insignificance? Hopefully other Christians will help us. We need to allow others to have the opportunity to encourage us. So we have to be somewhat open about ourselves. Otherwise we are just being prideful. We are denying that we have needs.

Our primary dependence should be upon the Lord. It is the issue of His acceptance of us that is the most important thing in life anyway. If we have trusted in Jesus as our Savior, we can know from the Bible that we have become part of God's family, and that He will never reject us. He tells us that we are secure, because we have eternal life and are always part of His family. He also tells us that we are important because we are His children, created in His image, serving the sovereign God of the universe. In order to develop the best possible relationship with this greatest source of security and significance we need to keep reading the Bible and getting to know Him and what He desires from us. Our intake of the Bible should encourage us about the security and significance that we have from our relationship with Him.

Actress Celeste Holm once remarked, "**We live by encouragement and die without it--- slowly, sadly and angrily.**" Why do we need encouragement? Because we are sinners who have fear--- fear of rejection by God and rejection by other people. What we need, and what others need, is encouragement given in an atmosphere of total commitment--- an encouragement that involves comforting and exhorting.

Decide to be an encouragement to someone today. Don't focus on yourself and your needs. Think about a fellow Christian's needs. Soon you will realize that your own needs for encouragement and acceptance are being fulfilled by the Lord Himself, who is able to meet your every need. So then brothers and sisters, "**...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.**"