

Romans 1:8-16, Hebrews 10: 19-25,

As Iron Sharpens Iron, Our need for Christian encouragement.

Portions adapted from THE ART OF ENCOURAGEMENT by MELVIN NEWLAND @ SermonCentral.com Hebrews 10: 19-25

In the fall of the year, Linda, a young woman, was traveling alone up the rutted and rugged highway from Alberta to the Yukon. Linda didn't know you don't travel to Whitehorse alone in a rundown Honda Civic, so she set off where only four-wheel drives normally venture. The first evening she found a room in the mountains near a summit and asked for a 5 A.M. wakeup call so she could get an early start. She couldn't understand why the clerk looked surprised at that request, but as she awoke to early-morning fog shrouding the mountain tops, she understood.

Not wanting to look foolish, she got up and went to breakfast. Two truckers invited Linda to join them, and since the place was so small, she felt obliged. "Where are you headed?" one of the truckers asked.

'Whitehorse'

"In that little Civic? No way! This pass is DANGEROUS in weather like this."

"Well, I'm determined to try," was Linda's gutsy, if not very informed, response.

"Then I guess we're just going to have to hug you," the trucker suggested.

Linda drew back. "There's no way I'm going to let you touch me!"

"Not like THAT!" the truckers chuckled. "We'll put one truck in front of you and one in the rear. In that way, we'll get you through the mountains."

All that foggy morning Linda followed the two red dots in front of her and had the reassurance of a big escort behind as they made their way safely through the mountains.

Caught in the fog in our dangerous passage through life, we need to be "hugged." With fellow Christians who know the way and can lead safely ahead of us, and with others behind, gently encouraging us along, we, too, can pass safely. (*Charles Swindoll, Growing Strong, p. 286.*)

Writing to a group of Roman Christians, most of whom he has never met, Paul first presents his credentials -- that he is an apostle, sent by Jesus Christ to share God's Good news with the Gentile world (verses 1-7). And now he explains why he has long wanted to come visit them in Rome:

I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. Romans 1:11

So here is the mighty Apostle Paul, God's evangelist to the gentile world, bold preacher, master teacher, accomplished missionary -- *Oh the stories he could tell of prisons, earthquakes, shipwrecks, and snakebites, and even once being mistaken for pagan god* – and yet his introduction betrays a bit of loneliness, spiritual fatigue, a need for some encouragement.

Paul wants to come to Rome both for the encouragement that he can bring but also that he can receive from these Roman Christians. Which I think touches upon an often overlooked benefit and need that every Christian has:

WE NEED EACH OTHER

TO BOTH ENCOURAGE AND BE ENCOURAGED BY !!

No Christian is an island.

If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a Church to raise a Christian.

So, think with me for a few moments about why and how many ways that we Christians can encourage and be encouraged by our fellow believers.

Think of some of the Biblical descriptions of Christian.

- We are "**Children of God**" living in the **family of God**. And just as all children need parental care and attention, all families need reunions; to reconnect and joke about how each other has grown height wise or width wise. And to coo over the new babies and wish Grandpa a happy 80th birthday.
- we are a members of a **Royal Priesthood** – which is a fraternity, a profession. And all professions need their conventions to swap ideas and keep up to date with each other.
- We are **Holy Nation**. And all nations have national holidays just to sit back and roast a hotdog or fajita and enjoy the benefits of citizenship.
- we are **bricks being built up together to form in the living House of God,**
- Each one of us is a needed member in the **Body of Christ**
- **We are the branches** Christ is our nourishing vine

All these terms imply that we need each other, in a vital way, to be able to live and to thrive.

Even our popular name "**Church**" which many think refers to a building actually refers to a gathering of people; God's "called out assembly;" a group that has been gathered together around something which we hold uniquely in common. But what can we have in common if we never gather in common?

Perhaps you think that I am pointing out the obvious, but God designed us with a need to live together (*God said, 'it is not good for the man to be alone.'* Genesis 2:18). This becomes doubly true when you become a member of the body of Christ.

just as the body is one and has many members,
and all the members of the body, though many,
are one body, so it is with Christ. ...

Now **you are the body of Christ
and individually members of it.**

1 Corinthians 12:27

One of the Biblical words which expresses this togetherness, this sharing of ourselves with each other is : "**fellowship.**" The Greek word is *koinonia*, which means **partnership, participation, communication, communion.** We desperately need FELLOWSHIP with each, because like all the parts of your own human body, we are interconnected, inter-dependent.

You need fellowship. I need fellowship. Apostles, prophets, preachers, teachers, Music Ministers, Elders, Deacons, choir members and Joyful Noisers, Sunday School teachers, ushers, children, adults, and Seniors, we all need each other in order to stay strong and healthy in the Body of Christ.

Because life has a way of wearing us down and without the support and fellowship of our family we are in real danger of – spiritually depression (death?). When a branch is cut from the vine – it may bloom for a while in a vase of water – but eventually having been cut off from the source of nourishment it dies. The same is true for you and me.

So even the Apostle Paul recognized that while he had much to give to the Roman Christians he also needed much to receive much from them in **fellowship.** And he used a very specific word to describe both this giving and receiving in fellowship. What we do when we fellowship with one another is we give and receive **encouragement.**

I am longing to see you so that I may share with you
some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather **so that we
may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith,** both
yours and mine. Romans 1:11

You might be interested in learning that while **FELLOWSHIP** means **partnership, participation, communication, communion,** The word **ENCOURAGEMENT** as Paul is using it here literally translates as: "**to call near;**" meaning that when we

encourage another, ***we are calling them near to us, we desire their presence, we are imploring them to do something*** . So these two words are forever entwined; because as the family of God, as the body of Christ, we are called to come together in a mutually supporting partnership, a communion.

let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, **not neglecting to meet together [fellowship]**, as is the habit of some, but **encouraging one another**, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:23-25

This is what our Hebrews passage makes plain; fellowship and encouragement go hand in hand. And if anything, as Christians, we need a lot more of both as time passes.

So let's quickly break our need to encourage each other down to the WHY, HOW, & WHEN

"Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."
John 13:35 (NLT)

WHY DO WE NEED TO ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER?

Because encouragement is a vital part of our love for one another.

Jesus said that loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving our neighbor equally would fulfill all of God's laws. And he later told his disciples (and us) that "*your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*" Jesus loves us without reservation. The way we show that we're His followers is by doing the same with one another.

Before he had even gotten to Rome, Paul wrote that having heard of their faith, he longed to see them to, give them "spiritual gifts" to "strengthen" them which he quickly noted would be a two-way affair; both giving and receiving encouragement. You only "*long to see*" those you love.

A lot of people don't understand what Christianity is all about. Christianity is about relationships - our relationship with God, & our relationship with others. It's not about

rules. It's not about knowledge. It's about loving, lasting relationships as such is expressed in **Fellowship** and **encouragement**.

William Wilberforce, was the man who worked so hard trying to get Parliament to abolish English support of slavery. Twice he was defeated in his efforts. Discouraged, he was about to give up.

When his old friend, John Wesley, heard of his discouragement, & even though Wesley was on his deathbed he pulled himself up & asked for pen & paper. With trembling hand Wesley wrote these words to Wilberforce:

"Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men & devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? Oh be not weary of well-doing! Go on, in the name of God & in the power of His might..."

Wesley died 6 days after writing those words, & Wilberforce, with renewed dedication, continued on. Then in 1833, just 3 days before his own death, it was brought to a vote once more, & Parliament finally abolished slavery in Britain. What if John Wesley hadn't encouraged him?

Encouragement is SO important because so much is at stake. We are God's children, members of His family living here on earth as His ambassadors. And as we said earlier, life has a way of wearing you down and we need the mutual love and support we give to each other in FELLOWSHIP & ENCOURAGEMENT to be built back up.

SO THAT IS THE WHY, next **HOW** CAN WE ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER?

let us **consider how** to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together [**fellowship**], as is the habit of some, but **encouraging** one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:23-25

Did you notice that this scripture is encouraging us to **THINK ABOUT HOW WE MIGHT ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER!** So one way we show our love for each other is by consciously thinking of ways to encourage one another especially with regard to their loving and doing good deeds (*that almost sounds circular*). The Bible clearly teaches us that our responsibility as members of God's family, His called out assembly –

known as the Church – is to be thinking of how we might encourage each other grow. So how do we do that?

Well the first, and most obvious way according to this scripture is **by our meeting together**. Our regular **FELLOWSHIP** is a source of **ENCOURAGEMENT**. There are some things the church cannot do well from a distance. This morning you could have turned on your TV to hear some great sermons being preached in Lynchburg, Atlanta, Florida, many other places. You could listen to and see some inspiring worship services. And if that is all that church is for, then you could just have stayed home & watched television.

But that's not what church is about. God gave His people a task that goes far beyond preaching & music - as important as they are. He's called us to be a family, a community, a fellowship. He's called us to come to know & love each other. Just like Paul, having heard of their faith he longed to see them to share his gifts and ministry and to receive from them the same.

The N.T. uses the phrase "*one another*" over 100 times: "*Love one another - serve one another - forgive one another - encourage one another.*" Just watching television won't do that. **The only way we can effectively encourage one another is by committing ourselves to being part of a church family – not just for the sermons or the music, but to live in relationship with one another.** We need each other!

So let's state the obvious but often unacknowledged truth **Just gathering together is a form of encouragement – both for you and for us.** When we skip the gathering we are not only discouraging our family members, but we are missing the encouragement they would give us.

We Modern Christians have gotten very casual about regular attendance at church services, we come to Church when there is nothing else to do. The saying is that *Church attendance should not be just a habit, but it is an easy habit to break.* Until not coming to Church becomes the habit.

You would be amazed at the number of former members who told me that they used to be faithful about Church attendance, especially when the kids were young, but then somebody said something, or they bought a boat, or a camper – and the and they just fell into the habit of not attending. This is one specific **habit** that the Bible warns us against: ***neglecting to meet together.*** Because when you are here, it encourages everyone (yourself included).

And when you are not here it not only discourages the rest of us, but, know it or not, it discourages you as well. **Do you need any better argument for trying your best to faithfully attend worship services, small groups?** We need to gather with one another for each other's encouragement.

But fellowship and encouragement is not just in getting to Church on Sunday, we are also supposed to be **THINKING** of ways to encourage each other.

The New Living Bible says, "***Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love & good works.***" Hebrew 10:24. Encouragement takes thought. The way you encourage one person might not be effective with another. We need to consider how best to encourage each other.

Returning to the The Greek word for "encourage." It is an interesting word because it comes out of a word with usually a negative meaning: which is "*to irritate or incite.*" It suggests the idea of prodding & poking. That's why our scripture also uses the word "provoke." To encourage means to provoke one another on to better things.

There was a little like the company that negotiated a new health insurance plan (back before the days of Obamacare) that required 100% employee participation. Every employee, both labor & management, had to be included or the plan would not go into effect.

It was a good plan & everybody signed up except Sam, who refused. His fellow workers pleaded with him, but to no avail.

Finally, the company president called Sam into his office. "Sam," he said, "this health plan is too good for us to lose out on. Now here's an application & a pen, & I want you to sign up. I'm sorry, but if you don't, I will have to fire you." Without any hesitation Sam grabbed the pen & signed up.

When it was all done, the president asked, "Sam, would you mind telling me why you didn't sign up earlier?" "Well, sir," said Sam, "nobody explained it to me quite so clearly before."

That's basically the idea behind the word "encourage" here. In a positive way, we are to incite others to "acts of love & good works."

If your gift is to **encourage others, be encouraging.**

If it is giving, give generously.

If God has given you leadership ability,
take the responsibility seriously.

**And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others,
do it gladly.** Romans 12:8(NLT)

Now for some of you, encouragement comes naturally, easily; it is a gift that God has given you for building up the body ... thank you for using your gift generously!

For others of us, to be encouraging is something we may have to work at. *I am in this crowd; so often I am thinking of other things rather than the person who is right in front of me. IF I have done this to you, please forgive me; I am working at being more present with the people I am with.* And for all of us, who for various reasons, are not naturals at it, encouragement won't happen unless we plan to do it. So let me give you some ideas on how you & I can encourage others.

I don't know what your mailbox is like, but mine gets stuffed full of magazines, bills, & junk mail. But when I see a handwritten note, that's almost always the one I open first. One of the most effective ways to encourage someone is a simple note telling them that you're thinking of them, & praying for them.

Some of you who have lost a loved one know how tough those anniversaries can be. For others it may be birthdays that pass, seldom noticed. Did you know that this Church has had a long tradition of people who make a ministry out of writing notes of encouragement. One member even went weekly to Oakwood Manor to write letters for residents that they with their too wobbly hands could no longer do. We need a lot more of these letter-writing ministers. The Church office has an abundance of decorated notecards. Just come in and grab a stack of such to have on hand. So when you are thinking kindly of someone – you can write it down and put a stamp on it; a big dose of encouragement will only cost you 47¢.

I also have a love/hate relationship with the telephone. Sometimes I'm torn between a desire to answer it, or throw it out a window. But what would happen if you picked up the phone to say, "*I don't have much time, but God just put you on my mind. I want you to know that you're in my prayers today.*" And yes for the younger generation, email, Facebook, Twitter – all work just as well. Facebook can certainly use a lot more encouraging words than have been posted up there lately.

I thank my God ... for all of you ...

I remember you always in my prayers ...

I am longing to see you

... so that we may be mutually encouraged
by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

Romans 1: 8-12

Do you realize that this world changing letter we are holding started out basically as a note of encouragement to the Roman Christians? Even though he had never met them, having heard of their faith, Paul wrote to them that he thanked God for them and their witness and that he was praying continually for them. And the reason for his visit was not that he needed a cheap vacation, but rather he wanted to further encourage them and be encouraged by them.

Have you ever written an encouraging letter to someone you never met? What a gift that would be to them

And sometime encouragement is just in being there to listen; not giving advice, not looking for answers, just listening, praying and maybe even crying to together as needed. There is a Honduran proverb: ***Grief shared is half grief. Joy shared is double joy.***

love one another with mutual affection ...
Rejoice with those who rejoice,
weep with those who weep.
Romans 12:10-15

Our Bible says it this way.

There are countless ways we can encourage each other.
First by our presence for fellowship in the Church or by a sick bed.
Second in notes – however delivered.
Third in words personally given.

They say a child spells LOVE T.I.M.E.
We children of God still need the same kind of love given and received.
For some its God's gift. For us all it is our ministry.
Once again, Our Bible says, "**Think of ways to encourage one another.**"
Put some thought into it
Commit to encouraging daily.

But encourage each other
every day while it is "today."
Help each other so none
of you will become hardened.
Hebrews 3:13 (NCV)

Encouragement needs to be our daily action. Because if we don't make it a regular habit, we'll only do it when we feel like it.

*Oh give me a home, ...
where never is heard a discouraging word
(and you can keep the buffalo).*

When you came this morning, it's likely you weren't particularly thinking of other people's needs. That's probably true of most of us. But there are a lot of needs here. And hidden opportunities for encouragement will only surface as we regularly look for them – only as we make a commitment to a habit of encouragement.

In closing, Proverbs 18:21 (NCV) says, "***What you say can mean life or death.***" Your encouraging words can change someone else's life, maybe even your life, maybe even – just like this letter – the whole World.