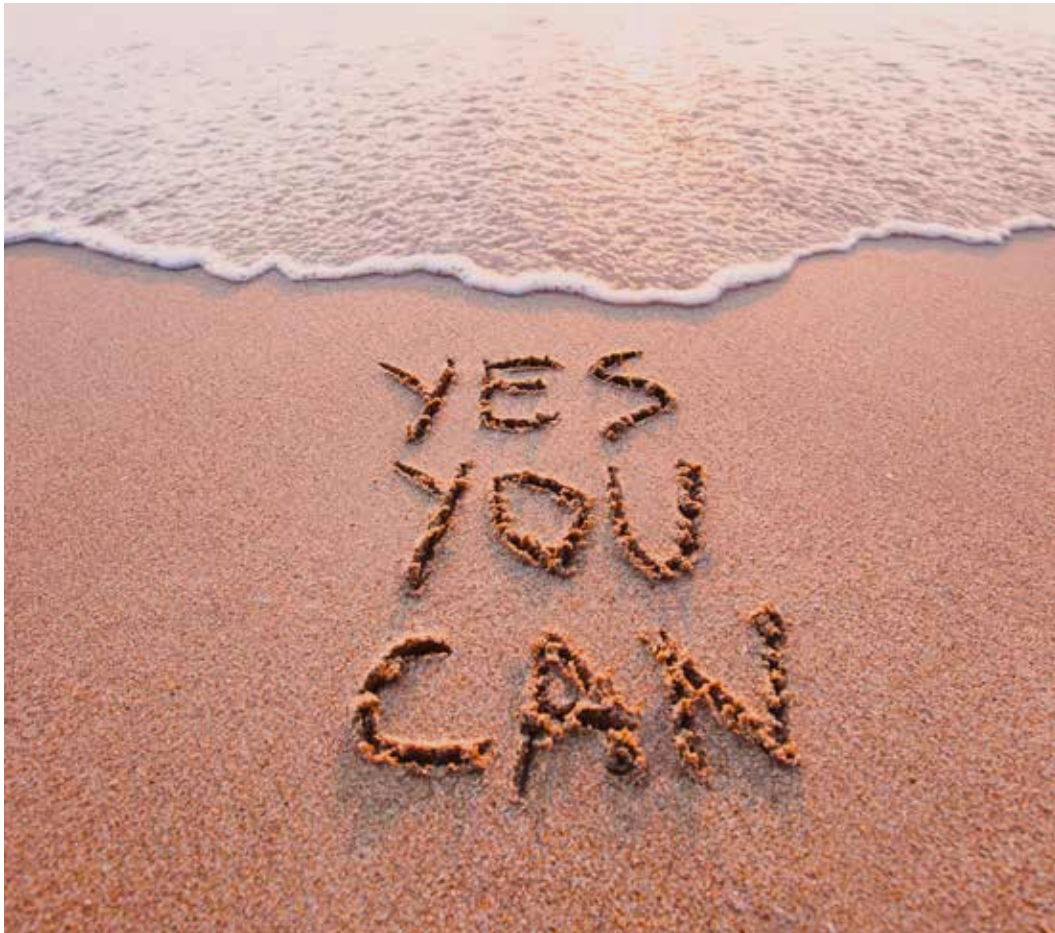


SESSION 4

We Encourage One Another



QUESTION 1:

How have you experienced the power of encouragement in your life?

THE POINT

We need the encouragement of others—and they need ours.

THE PASSAGE

Ephesians 4:17-32

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

In 1895, sixteen-year-old Edward Steichen bought a camera with money his mother gave him and started snapping pictures around the house—fifty of them, in fact. When the film was developed, he had forty-nine bad pictures and only one good one: a picture of his sister at the piano. His father thought that was a poor showing, but his mother insisted that one photo was beautiful and more than compensated for forty-nine failures. Her encouragement convinced the boy to stick with his new hobby.

Edward pressed on to become one of the world's most renowned photographers. But in the beginning, he almost gave up. What pushed him forward were his mother's encouraging words in the midst of a lot of failure.¹

The Christian life can be hard at times. Temptations abound, and we sometimes struggle to honor God in our lives. Encouragement from fellow believers is a great help in this struggle. Their words of support push us forward when we might be tempted to give in or give up. We need the encouragement of other believers—and they need ours.

Ephesians 4:17-22

17 Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord: You should no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their thoughts.

18 They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts.

19 They became callous and gave themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more.

20 But that is not how you came to know Christ,

21 assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus,

22 to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires,

Becoming a Christian is not about improving yourself, becoming more spiritual, or “turning over a new leaf.” It’s a radical transformation, a rebirth. It’s about receiving a new identity—one that produces new longings, godly dispositions, and fruitful behaviors. The Christian life is marked by contrasts; it’s a life that distinguishes between “what I used to be” and “what I am today.” As the apostle Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17). God saves us just the way we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way. Through our new identity, He produces a new way of living.

Because of our new life in Christ, we must resist returning to sinful attitudes or actions. Toward that end, Paul told us “to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires.” As people living a new life through Jesus, we must put away those attitudes and actions that conflict with God’s holiness. In verse 22, Paul told us what to do—discard the old way

of life—but he preceded that in verses 17-21 by telling us why. We are to shed our former way of living because ...

- ▶ ... Christians aren't to do the same things non-Christians do (v. 17).
- ▶ ... Christians aren't to be ignorant to God's commands (v. 18).
- ▶ ... Christians aren't to allow their hearts to become hardened to the things of God (v. 18).
- ▶ ... Christians aren't to increasingly pursue impure living like non-Christians do (v. 19).
- ▶ ... living in sin is not how Jesus has taught us to live (vv. 20-21).

Picture a summer day of working or exercising outside. The weather was especially warm. Maybe you walked or did yard work. Whatever you imagine yourself doing, at the end of it, you were hot, sweaty, dirty, and smelly. Your clothes and your body were a dirty, stinky mess, but how refreshing it was to shed those dirty clothes and stand under a cool, cleansing shower! What once was filthy is now been washed clean. What was weary has been renewed. I love this imagery because it pictures in a small way how Jesus cleanses us at salvation. When we bring to him the dirtiness of our sin, He places us under the cleansing flow of His grace, and He makes us new. Thank God for His grace—and thank God for showers!

How ludicrous it would be after a long, hot day to come inside and take a refreshing shower only to put on the same filthy clothes again! I cringe just thinking about it! Why? It's ludicrous because dirty, soiled clothes don't belong on a bathed, clean body. In much the same way, impure attitudes and actions aren't suitable in a life made pure by the blood of Jesus. A life characterized by sin just doesn't belong with a heart saved by the gospel of Jesus.

And that's Paul's point in this passage. You and I have a biblical responsibility to not return to the dirty clothes. Jesus didn't save us so that we might continue to wear the things He died to save us from. He saved us to wear a new wardrobe—to be adorned with the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

QUESTION 2:

What changed the most when you became a follower of Jesus?

Ephesians 4:23-28

23 to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,

24 and to put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.

25 Therefore, putting away lying, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another.

26 Be angry and do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger, **27** and don't give the devil an opportunity.

28 Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need.

In the Christian life marked by contrasts, we've seen what we're supposed to "take off" (our old sinful habits) (Eph. 4:22). Now, let's consider what we're to "put on." We are "to put on the new self." In saying this, Paul painted a stark contrast between the old self and the new self. "The old self" (v. 22) was "excluded from the life of God" (v. 18) while "the new self" was "created according to God's likeness." The old self was characterized by darkness, ignorance, and impurity (vv. 18-19) while the new self is characterized by "righteousness and purity of the truth." Jesus saves us in order to change us. This does not mean we will always be perfect, but it does mean that we should not intentionally return to our "former way of life" (v. 22) or make room for old besetting sins. Instead, we are to persistently pursue attitudes and actions consistent with our new life in Christ.

The pursuit of holiness includes both individual and corporate responsibility. Each believer is responsible for his or her own choices. God holds each one of us accountable for what we do not

“take off” and for what we do not “put on.” But the body of Christ serves as an invaluable resource in encouraging us in our pursuit. In turn, we should encourage our Christian brothers and sisters in their pursuit of living for Christ. And all of us can and should depend on God’s grace to empower us in our Christian growth.

ENGAGE

Record specific words that describe your “old self” (your character before encountering Jesus).

Record specific words that describe your “new self” (your character after encountering Jesus).

In this passage, Paul outlined three life changes—ways we can demonstrate the “new self” in our Christian lives. Each includes a negative principle, a positive alternative, and a spiritual reason why.

1. **Life Change #1** (v. 25)

- ▶ The negative: Put “away lying.”
- ▶ The positive: “Speak the truth” to each other.
- ▶ The reason: We are members of one another. Lying to a fellow believer is like lying to yourself because we are all part of the same body of Christ.

2. **Life Change #2** (vv. 26-27)

- ▶ The negative: “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger” (unrighteous anger).
- ▶ The positive: Paul inferred that we can be angry sometimes and yet not sin. This is commonly called righteous anger, and it includes anger over injustices and harm done to others. (See Mark 3:5; 11:15-17.)

- ▶ The reason: Anger can be considered righteous when it's over injustices to others, but self-centered anger is sin. Allowing unrighteous anger to fester gives “the devil an opportunity” in our lives.

3. Life Change #3 (v. 28)

- ▶ The negative: Do not steal.
- ▶ The positive: Do honest work.
- ▶ The reason: We are not only to look out for our own need, but for the needs of others. Through honest work, we can have “something to share with anyone in need.”

If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you know that growing in Christlikeness can be difficult. Some life changes come easier than others, but as a whole, putting on the new self can be challenging. Like young Edward, our many failures might tempt us to throw in the towel. We need encouragement from others—and they need our encouragement for the same reason. Let's help one another to live consistently with our new life in Christ.

QUESTION 3:

Who has inspired you to live consistent with your new life in Christ?

Ephesians 4:29-32

29 No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.

30 And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption.

31 Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice.

32 And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.

We receive encouragement in a variety of ways. Sometimes, it comes through the presence of a friend or a pat on the back. Most of the time, encouragement comes from the words of others. As a matter of fact, it's hard to imagine how one might be consistently encouraged in life without words. Whether typed in a letter, written in a card, sent via text message, or spoken in person, the words of others serve as a primary means by which the Lord encourages His people.

But not all words are encouraging. People also cheapen words by being insincere or by “weaponizing” words to inflict harm. Christian counselors Larry Crabb and Dan Allender have organized the words we speak to others into three primary categories:

1. **Shallow words:** insincere words that lack meaning or depth;
2. **Death words:** hurtful words that tear down; and
3. **Life words:** encouraging words that build up.²

The words we speak matter. James described the tongue as “a small part of the body” with the power to set “the course of life on fire” (Jas. 3:5-6). With it, we have the ability to both bless and curse (v. 10). God expects His children to build one another up instead of tearing each other down. Our words matter.

Paul also exhorted us to watch our mouths. “No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.” Wow! What an incredible admonition from God’s Word! What would happen if every follower of Jesus Christ lived out this verse? How would our conversations differ if we resolved to allow no room for language that was coarse, foul, or worthless? How might our relationships thrive if, when talking to others, each of us consciously thought about using our words to build others up rather than spewing speech that tears them down—in other words, use language that brings life rather than death?

Ephesians 4:29 serves as a holy standard for all Christian speech and conversation. Striving to speak this way consistently is another way God showcases His work through our lives. Since the world generally doesn't speak this way to others, Christians demonstrate the gospel's power to save when we do. We can infer from verse 30 that it's the Holy Spirit of God who empowers us to speak life-giving words and to guard our tongues. When we choose foul and worthless words, we grieve God's Spirit.

When we choose to guard our tongues, we also protect ourselves from igniting further sins of personal destruction between ourselves and others. Tearing others down with our words leads to a harvest of rotten fruit including bitterness, anger, wrath, slander, and malice. Each of these sins is intricately connected to the words we say. And just like all foul and worthless language, Paul commanded us in verse 31 to put these away too. Again, our words and the emotions that trigger them matter to God.

While unwholesome talk leads to interpersonal sin, life-giving words produce just the opposite: a well-spring of interpersonal joy. Verse 32 says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another; forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ." Speaking life-giving words both encourages our brothers and sisters in Christ and emulates our perfect Father in heaven. So, let's not grieve God's Spirit by tearing each other down with our words; instead, let's depend on the Holy Spirit and build each other up with our words.

QUESTION 4:

How can the actions and attitudes listed in verse 31 affect the disposition of a person's heart?

QUESTION 5:

What do our words reveal about our hearts?

LIVE IT OUT

How will you use your words to encourage others in the body of Christ? Consider the following applications:

- ▶ **Talk to God.** Through prayer, ask God to bring to light any words, phrases, or patterns of speech that you need to “put away.” Ask God for the grace needed to speak words of life and encouragement instead.
- ▶ **Talk to yourself.** One of the best ways to “talk to yourself” is speaking the Word of God to yourself. In that light, consider memorizing Ephesians 4:29: “No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.”
- ▶ **Talk to others.** Identify three people who might be encouraged by your words. Write cards, craft emails, send texts, or meet with each of them face to face to encourage them in their walk with Jesus.

No one grows as a Christian in isolation, and very little spiritual growth happens without the encouragement of other believers God has placed in our path. Be that person who encourages with both words and actions.



END NOTES

1 Alden Whitman, “Edward Steichen Is Dead at 93; Made Photography an Art Form,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 1973, www.nytimes.com/1973/03/26/archives/edward-steichen-is-dead-at-93-made-photography-an-art-form-edward.html.

2 Dr. Larry Crabb and Dr. Dan Allender. *Encouragement: The Key to Caring* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 21-23.