

## The Gift of Encouragement

Everyone at one time or another needs encouragement. The smallest child taking his or her first step is encouraged by their parent in the smile on their face and the outstretched hands beckoning them onward. The elderly preparing for the time when their physical body ceases and their spiritual life in eternity with our Lord begins in fullness need encouragement too. Perhaps it is found in the eyes or touch of their caregiver giving complete love and comfort in their last moments here on earth. There are days when encouragement takes the form of a cup of coffee shared between friends. Time and talk mix, allowing two people to draw confidence in friendship. And on the days where it seems the storm clouds are raging, the encouragement comes from the loved one who steps beside us holding that symbolic umbrella. They let us know we are surrounded by unconditional love and support.

Encouragement comes in different shapes and forms. It is a precious gift given by the Holy Spirit who dwells within our heart. However, encouragement is not meant to be used personally. It is a gift to be shared with others. Our nature is the love of God and our lives should reflect this belief in the way we dispense understanding. If we truly know all that Jesus Christ has done for us, how can we not in turn do the same for others? If we understand how much mercy, compassion and unconditional love the Father bestowed upon us through forgiveness then we should give nothing less.

In I John 5: 1-3 it states *“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten by God; and whoever loves the Father that begot him loves the child whom he begets. We can be sure that we love God’s children if we love God himself and do what he commanded us; this is what loving God is—keeping his commandments;”* Some may say that keeping the commandments are not an easy task. Christ gave us two which encompass all ten in the Old Testament. This is mentioned in different places in Scripture, but the one I will use is found in I John 3:23. *“His commandments are these: that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and that we love one another as he told us to.”* How did God tell us to love? Unconditionally!

“Love unconditionally, please, how is that possible?” Well, we know God cannot lie nor can he be lied to. What does Scripture, the written Word of God, say? Go back to I John 5: 3-4. *“...this is what loving God is—keeping his commandments; and his commandments are not difficult.”* It is not difficult because the Holy Spirit in our hearts is our source of love. As Paul said, *“I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me.”* (Gal.2:20) If it is Christ who lives, then it is Christ who loves, and it is Christ who encourages others through us.

In this world it is easy to see the desire to break people down. It is found on television when the latest celebrity hits hard times. It’s publicized and commented on continuously until the next victim goes afoul of society. Some people tear others apart with such enjoyment that it is scary. What is even more frightening is that this also occurs within the body of believers. We are the family of God. Like in a large family, the older children take care of the younger siblings. We show them how to do their jobs properly and then redirect them when they go in the wrong direction. We are to be their biggest cheer leaders in faith. For me, I look to the early Christians to see how it was for them. Encouragement must have been very important for the early Church because it is spoken of many times in the Bible. It is clearly seen in the appeal of Paul in Romans

15:5-7. *“And may he who helps us when we refuse to give up, help you all to be tolerant with each other, following the example of Christ Jesus, so that united in mind and voice you may give glory to the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It can only be to God’s glory, then, for you to treat each other in the same friendly way as Christ treated you.”*

Encouragement goes beyond empathy. Encouragement goes beyond compassion. For the believer, it is co-passion. If you know what Christ did for you by his death, resurrection, and forgiveness then you, by entering into him, become part of that passion when it is shared with others. Encouragement has its source in the gift God has given us. He would have not told us to encourage one another unless there was the ability within to perform this action.