

Encouragement

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[0 : 0 0] Romans chapter 12, from verse 5, I'm coming in halfway through a sentence, but we read these words, so we thought many are one body in Christ and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.

If prophecy in proportion to our faith, if service in our serving, the one who teaches in his teaching, the one who exhorts in his exhortation, the one who contributes in generosity, the one who leads with zeal, the one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness. Now you may think, well, hang on, I didn't hear encouragement in there, but we'll come back to that. The word that we're thinking about there is actually exhortation. So this is one way of expressing that word, encouragement. Now, like I said, by way of just opening up the subject a bit and thinking about this as an introduction, if you're going to go through something in your life that's difficult, that's going to tax you, almost break you, you're going to need some encouragement, aren't you? You're going to need somebody or something that's going to give you hope and light in amongst whatever it is that you find really tough to keep going. That's just something about being human. We talk about chasing a lost cause. It's very difficult. It's no fun. Certainly something like enduring a prison camp. Now you may think, well, that's an extreme example, but I was reading a book this week. I'm reading a book called Wild Places, I think, and it's a guy who takes different locations across the UK. He loves the outdoors. So every chapter is about a different kind of terrain. He goes to the forests. He goes to the lochs. He goes to the moors, and he just lives out and he goes out there into the wild places. And in the chapter on Moorland describes the wild places, he goes up to Rannach Moor. He takes the train up with his father, actually, and they trek across Rannach Moor and they camp out under the stars. It's freezing cold, and a lot of you would probably hate that, but anyway, he loves it. But as he was doing that, it reminded him of somebody he'd read about, a chap called Murray, who had fought in the

First World War and had been taken into captivity and put in, well, a variety, actually, of prison camps. And he'd had to endure this for a number of years. And you know, the thing about this guy was that he lived to go walk in pre-war. He loved the wild open spaces, and specifically he loved the mountains. So it describes in this book how on the day that he heard about the war and he knew he had to sign up and go through the drafting process, he climbed for the last time. I can't remember the name of the mountain above the Moor, but he climbed and just sat there for ages, just soaking it in, soaking in the wonder, the joy, the loveliness, the wildness of that place, because that fed him, you know, it really filled him with a sense of life. And it was as, the point of this is that as he was going through his awful ordeal in the camps that he was kept in, he started to write on anything he could find, tissue paper, toilet paper, his recollections of the free spaces that existed in his mind. And in one of the camps in Northern Italy, I think, where he was transferred to, he was let out into the yard for occasions during the day, and he could just see one of the range, the Italian ranges, mountain ranges, and that kind of just fed this sense of hope, it fed his encouragement, his sense of keeping going with life. That for him, that for him was the encouragement. And so he effectively wrote a book during all this time, just of his recollections and love for and longing to see again the mountains. And he did, he made it through, he survived, and it goes on to describe how he, when he was freed, broken almost in his body, he got back up to Rannochmore and walked it again. So for him, that sense of looking inside, remembering and being encouraged, finding hope was absolutely vital and absolutely crucial. We all need that at different times in our lives. We all need that sense of hope and of encouragement to keep going. The difficulty is, I think, doing what he did is incredibly hard. Actually having something that you can take hold of and hang on to, kind of looking within, it's really, really hard. And so actually what we often need in the times of trouble that we face, and this applies to the Christian life of course, is somebody else, another who will come

alongside you and encourage you, who will bring you encouragement, or somebody you can call out to and say, I need encouragement right now. I need you. I need you to come and help me. Because we struggle, even if we try to look within so very often, to find the encouragement there that we need.

We need help, as it were, to see the wonderful, beautiful mountain range when the walls are closing in, or when the circumstances are pressing us that bit too tightly. But here's a question, just as we kind of get going into this theme, what is it that we look to as Christians? You know I said that sometimes even Christians can really struggle and need encouragement. For what? To see what? Well, that's the first thing, isn't it? Let me just read another verse in Colossians, keeping a sight of what is our hope, of what it is that encourages us, is so important. In Colossians chapter 2 we read this. Paul says these words to believers, who he wants to encourage. I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you, and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance, of understanding, and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. So Paul's saying to Christians, I really, really care for you, because I want you to know the wonderful richness of Jesus himself, where you are now in whatever you're facing now. That's if you like the glimpse that we long for, or need to long for, in the circumstances that hem us in, and press us around so tightly in life. Just to come back to the passage, encouragement, you'll have noticed that the way it translates it in the English Standard Version is exhortation.

[7:27] So the one who exhorts in his exhortation. So encouragement is more than just sort of being a bit of a cheerleader, isn't it? You can see here that it's rooted in being focused on God's kingdom and the gospel, and it almost has a sense of urging somebody. If an encourager comes, biblically speaking, they come alongside to urge somebody on to exhort them. Now, I don't know how you kind of think, what you feel when you hear that word. Somebody exhorting me, I may not even be that comfortable with that. It sounds like they may even be putting a bit of pressure on me, but it really carries the sense of somebody coming alongside and bating you along, really encouraging you, not just saying, hey, go on there, you're doing a good job. Yeah, you're doing fine. There's a strong strength to this word, okay?

The word *parakaleo*, the Greek word, really has this sense of to call somebody near. So if I need encouragement, I don't want just somebody to say, yay, go you. I want to call somebody alongside to come near to me in my difficulty, in my struggle, my circumstances, in my wrestling with faith, in my knowing Jesus, I want somebody to come near. *Parakaleo*, so very similar of course to the word Jesus uses to talk about the Holy Spirit, a *parakeet*, okay? And what do we know of the Holy Spirit? The one who comes alongside the advocate, the counselor, the comforter, doesn't just stand on the sidelines, God sends His Spirit into every believer to exhort them, to encourage them, to bless them, to keep them going, to testify to them, to their heart and their mind about Jesus. So there's this real sense, the strength of the word, the closeness of coming alongside. Here's what it's not, okay?

When we talk about encouragement from a biblical sense, here's what we're not really talking about. It's not personality based, so you might be a really encouraging person tonight, and that's good. We need encouraging people who are kind of effervescent and who give off good vibes and who generally encourage people, that's great. God may well use that to great effect, but it's not just that, okay? So you might be an encouraging person who has a great personality, who's very effervescent, but you may not encourage somebody else biblically.

In terms of the gospel, in terms of exhorting them to keep going for the kingdom, there is a difference there. It's more than that. It's not rooted in your own charisma. It has to be more than that, because if it's rooted in your own charisma, if it's rooted in your ability to come alongside and build somebody up, then they'll come a day when you're at the end of yourself, you're tired and you don't really want to exhort or encourage somebody else, because you need encouragement, and you don't have it within yourself. If it's all about you, then you will come to the end of you. It has to be that you, as an encourager, are rooted in the gospel and in Jesus Christ. So the encouragement has to be about taking people and pointing them not to yourself or just giving them words of happiness, or even a bit more than that, but Christ Himself. Neil touched on this. I listened to Neil Sermon last week about leadership, and he said about leadership, it's not about kind of making people buy into my own personal program or your own personal program to get them to do what

you want them to do. It's about enabling people to follow Jesus and to give a scent, if you like, to living under His Lordship, and in a very real way. It's the same with encouragement, but it's about coming alongside somebody and helping them to keep in step with the Spirit. It's kingdom focused. So it's not just personality based. It's not just about personal affirmation. I think that's a kind of hallmark of our culture nowadays.

People want to be affirmed, of course we do. Affirmation is good. It's important to encourage one another in a general sense, again, in terms of life and what's going on with us.

[11 : 55] But it's much more than just getting alongside people and saying, yeah, go you, be yourself, again, another hallmark of our culture. Just you be yourself and stay true to your heart.

Because Christianity is about being conformed to the likeness of Jesus, isn't it? It's about submitting our own will, our character, who we are, what we do to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and sometimes we don't like that, or we don't know what it looks like, or we've lost our way. And so we need to say to somebody, we need to call out and say, come alongside, or if you see somebody who's drifting and struggling, you need to go alongside them and call them back again to submit to Jesus. So it's more than just giving personal affirmation.

And finally, in this little sequence, it's more than just inspiration. So people can be a great inspiration, and that can be quite encouraging, can't it? We see somebody and they're like awesome at football or whatever. Wow, amazing. I'm going to be like that too.

They've inspired me. But again, we get to the end of ourselves because our heroes fail, don't they? They fail us at different times. And sometimes we just can't be like our heroes, which is rubbish, but it's true. So it doesn't, that's not enough if it's just about inspiration.

I Googled encouraging people. I got all kinds of things, of course. And one of the things I got, actually, do you know what, most of the things that came up, the first kind of 10 searches, Google searches, of encouraging people, was really interesting. It was basically lists of famous people who are inspiring. So there was quite a few that did the same thing. They would list a bunch of celebrities whose lives started out really in difficult circumstances, but who punched on through and have made it, like Shania Twain, apparently, had a really, really tough start to life. Jim Carrey, all people like this. And again, the problem with that, I mean, good for them, but the problem with that, of course, is then it's up to me. Okay, so they've done really well. They've fought against the odds and they've made it, and they're mega celebrities and they're wealthy. Now I got to do the same.

[14 : 19] Or feel like I've not made it in the same way that they have. Good for them to have made it. But again, if it's just that, it's all up to me. So it's more than just inspiration.

Biblical encouragement, the kind of encouragement that the Bible consistently points out, the kind of encouragement or exhortation that is mentioned in this passage in Romans here, just as we open it up in this first half of the sermon, is where an individual rooted in the gospel, rooted in Jesus Christ, comes alongside another and encourages and exhorts and counsels and comforts and challenges to further that discipleship. To further that discipleship. So that by way of introduction, that by way of opening up just the theme and what kind of thing we're talking about here. I think it's more than, I was thinking about a few ways that this might look. It's more again than just a cheerleader, somebody who comes alongside and says, yeah, you're doing a great job. You're fine. Just keep going.

That's kind of shallow, isn't it? It's also more than the kind of encouragement to use a kind of sporting analogy where you get those, you know, the crowds who lie in the roads of the great Tour de France events, cycling events, people who shout and cut it out, really, really spurring them on. There's a real exhortation there, faster, gone. But they're gone in a flash. The cyclist just passes them once and then they're gone. And I think it's more like, this is kind of imperfect as an example, but it's more like somebody setting out for a really long, challenging, like a cross channel swim. And you know, there's that boat there, just over the shoulder in the background a little bit, always there to come alongside though, to give them the encouragement that they need and to help them remember that they're going to the shore on the other side to keep going and to keep focused. And then they maybe hold back a bit and then they come alongside again when the strength is flagging, somebody who's there consistently and when needed and who keeps the focal point as the focal point as a consistent help to finish the task. So now what we'll do is look at a few different passages because the Bible's great. It gives us one particular, probably a load of different examples, but one particular character study throughout the book of Acts, somebody who is a real encourager and his name is Barnabas. So what I want to do now is just the texts are going to come up on the screens.

And this will help us to sort of see a character study is great because it puts us in real life situations. What does it look like then to be somebody who is a biblical encourager? There are a few different examples here. First one is from

Acts chapter four. So if we could put the first one up here. I'm just going to read these through and then pick out one particular thing from each and we'll move through thinking about Barnabas a little bit in this way. So from Acts four, there was not a needy person among them talking about the early days, if you like, of the Christian church after Jesus has ascended and the church is really just getting going. There was not a needy person among them for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles feet. And it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet. So here we meet Barnabas. Here we find out that his nickname was Barnabas. He was so known for being encouragement and encourager that that's the way they nicknamed him. And what's the first thing that we find him doing? This may be quite a familiar passage to you if you've been a Christian for a while and if you've maybe read about the days of the early church and how great and radical they were. Well, he's somebody who seeing the need of others sold from his excess and brought and gave the proceeds to the apostles to be given as needed. So what does that tell us? Because this is a, this first of all, isn't it? It's not about speech, it's about action. How encouraging were his actions? It tells us that he's more interested in kingdom work and in people because the kingdom is all about people than he is in his own personal gain, okay? Because he was prepared to do this. So this, by way of introduction to Barnabas. Okay, second passage.

[19:14] Comes from Acts chapter nine. Now, this describes a time when Saul had been converted. Saul, of course, was somebody who terrorized Christians. He had murderous intent towards believers.

And yet his life is completely transformed. But you imagine being a Christian and hearing about the change in Saul's life. The guy, you're telling me the guy who tried to kill us is one of us and he wants to be friends with us. So this is kind of the background to the situation here. When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples.

And they were all afraid of him because they didn't believe he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord who spoke to him and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. Now, Saul, of course, because of the Lord's will was to become such a great preacher of the gospel. But being there in that moment, Barnabas didn't necessarily know that, but he saw something of the way in which the Lord had been at work in this man. And he was willing, he was willing to come alongside Saul, Paul, the one who people were, people were looking a bit, I can't say that. And if you like, put his arm around him, I don't know whether he did put his arm around him and usher him in to the company of believers in that sense, almost risking his own standing or reputation. He was willing to get alongside this man whom God had been so powerfully at work in who people were still so afraid of and bring him in, bring him into the company of believers. So if you like, at one level, his reputation, his own sense of who he was was on the line here.

Third reading, Acts chapter 11. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. So Barnabas is commissioned to do a particular job, in other words, he's trusted by the church. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people and in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. Now you see what's happening here, we're moving through the book of Acts, we're reading about the development of the Christian church, people are becoming Christians, which is what Jesus wanted to happen when he left, he commissioned his disciples to go and make disciples, and the Gospel is spreading. Now Barnabas is commissioned to go and speak to this community of people, and see what, see what, if we can flick back just a minute, if that's possible, see what happens when he goes and hears the good news about the Gospel. Now you may think this is just obvious, but when he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, he's delighted by the

spread of the Gospel. Just notice that, that again is all about being rooted, personally rooted in and rooting for the kingdom of God. It's what delights him, it's what he wants to happen. Obviously he's been commissioned by the church to go and do this work, so he's a bit of a pivotal figure at this moment, but do you see what he does next, if we flip over to the second slide? Then he goes and gets Saul, why does he do that? Because he knows the value that Saul has, he knows that he's a skilled and a powerful preacher, so he's not afraid to go and get somebody else who's maybe a more impressive preacher than he is, he senses God is going to use, so in other words, he's prepared to take a step back and bring somebody else in, and the two of them there continue in ministry for the building up of the fellowship for a year. And again, this ministry flourishes as they work together for the sake of the Gospel. He's not all about the limelight, he's not about himself and his own ego. A great example there again. Okay, next example. Now I'm actually going to mention one that I've actually not put in the slides, forgive me. In Acts chapter 14, I didn't put this in the slides, but there's a pretty extraordinary account of Paul and Barnabas because really it's the kind of middle section of Acts picks up speed, they minister together a lot. Well, there's this really interesting incident where people see Paul and Barnabas and they think, wow, these guys are so impressive. They've got so much to say. We're really taken with the message that they're bringing to us and what they want to say to us, to the extent that they think they must be descendants of the gods. And what they say to them is that they call Barnabas Zeus, who's the father of the gods, and they call Paul Hermes, who is the son of the gods, and the messenger. So notice still in Acts is that slight distinction in the Barnabas is maybe seen as the older, more reverent one, and Paul is the dynamic one, the messenger, the one who comes speaking.

[25 : 10] But the reaction is key. They're horrified. They're absolutely horrified. They've got a potential position of power. There's a potential for them to be swayed off the path, but they're horrified at the thought that people would misconstrue what they're trying to do and who they are. And what they do is they point the people back to Jesus, back to God and who He really is. They want to put off themselves and they want to magnify God. Again, a fundamental characteristic of an encourager, an exhorter, somebody who's able to get alongside another Christian and build them up is that they want the glory of God, not their own renown.

Okay, so the next example I did add to the slides. We'll read these words. After some days Paul said to Barnabas, let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord and see how they are. Now, Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark, but Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Panphilia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement so that they separated from each other, Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Cyria and Silicia, strengthening the churches. Okay, this is the second last example. This is a bit different. You've got these men who've been brought together, who are engaged in Kingdom ministry in dramatically exciting times to the point where Paul says, hey, we've come to the end of this missionary journey, let's go back the way and meet again some of the people that we've been meeting and hear how things are going. But they have a dispute to the extent that they actually separate in this particular instance. And that's because Paul wasn't sure about Mark.

Now, Mark previously had let them down. And Paul's thinking is, you know what, we need spot on people here, we need people we can rely on. I need to know that the people who are going to go with us are going to remain faithful. Mark, let us down. I don't think he's the right guy to go on this trip. But there's a pretty valid position that Paul's got there. And Mark, who happens to, Barnabas, who happens to be Mark's cousin, is willing to say, no, I want to give him another chance. I want to bring him with us and encourage him. I want him to come with us. He'll be useful. And they can't agree to the extent that they separate. Now, I'm not going to go into the separation. Suffice to say that both of them continued on different paths, if you like, of ministry. But it's really significant to see one final quote, which we're going to put up just now, later on in Paul's writing when he writes to Timothy, because he speaks later, further down the line, about Mark, who he had such reservations about. He really, really, really wasn't sure about Mark. And yet, later on in his ministry, he writes these words, do your best to come to me soon. For Dimas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

Christians has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful for me in ministry.

So here's the thing. The dispute that had arisen between Barnabas and Paul over Mark, because Paul really wasn't so sure about Mark, that Barnabas had come on and wanted to bring Mark with him. Maybe I'm reading between the lines here, but what happens is that Mark goes on in the faith, he's discipled, he's built up to the extent where the now renowned powerful preacher Paul says, you know what, bring Mark, because he'll be really, really useful. Now, is that the impact of Barnabas, the one who was willing, maybe again to put his reputation on the line, certainly to bring along and give a second chance to somebody who had previously failed. Barnabas, the encourager, is willing to see somebody imperfect, had let other folks down in the past, but he's willing to give him another chance. He's willing to spend time with him, to seek to bring him on again in the Lord. For Paul, it wasn't right. Paul needed people who were ready to go right in that moment, but Barnabas was prepared, I think, to be with him, to be alongside him and to encourage him. And praise God, because ultimately he's the one who works in his people. Mark grew in the faith and flourished and became so useful later on down the line in his life. So these are the examples

[30 : 27] I wanted to just bring out. I hope they've been useful. They're just something of what it looks like to be an encourager. That's what he was known for. Somebody asked me at a camp I was at last year, how can we encourage you ministers? How can I be a person in a church who's an encouragement? And I didn't give a very good answer actually at the time. I didn't really know what to say. But I think those kinds of characteristics and qualities in Barnabas, because of his, the depth of his faith in Jesus and because of his love for the name of Jesus and because of his concern for the kingdom of Jesus, are such a great starting point to be an encourager. The Christian path is a long haul for us, isn't it? If you're a believer today, you may be feeling that and you may be feel the need for encouragement.

It's a long haul. And you know, God has left us not alone, but he's left us with his word and his spirit who indwells us and each other. Never forget that. You know, we're not, we don't just gather here on a Sunday for a wee while and then go off and do our thing again.

He's given you the potential, he's given you the potential to be deeply spiritually encouraging by his grace, to the praise of his glory to another believer. And he's given you the potential to receive encouragement. Sometimes that's the hard part. Sometimes that's the part we don't like very much because it involves vulnerability and honesty. And we'd maybe rather keep somebody at a bit of a distance and say, we're fine. I'm called to give encouragement in different ways. We're all called to give encouragement to different people in different ways. And we're called to receive encouragement and not be proud when we need that. I'll leave you with a verse from Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians chapter five, again, this is just to kind of look up and see again the wonder of the calling that we have. It's like that vision of the mount, the kind of the snow top mountain range that the chap was looking at in captivity. What is the vision that we have, the vision that we have that keeps us going and which we use to encourage one another with, the calling that we have.

In 1 Thessalonians, he died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Isn't that astonishing? We may live together with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up just as in fact you are doing. So may God help us do that because he wants us to. He's called us to do that. I'm going to pray.

Father, we are so grateful tonight that our salvation is not based on our works that really would lead us to despair because we can't do that. We thank you that it's based on what Jesus has done. But we recognize that you, by your grace, you work in us by your spirit to keep us, to sustain us. But you also call us to be encouragers to one another and you charge us with this as well, that we should build one another up in the gospel. I pray that you would help us to do that, that we would take the opportunities we have to be more than just acquaintances passing on occasional Sundays and that we would be willing to receive encouragement or exhortation, challenge, counsel and comfort when we need it. And so Lord, we pray that you would build us up by being at work amongst us and making us into this kind of community for the glory of your name and the spread of your kingdom, we ask. In Jesus' name, amen.