



Into the Light

September-October 2007

Matthew 19.26

Be Encouraged

By Bob Van Domelen

¹If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. (Phil.2.1-2)

Lately there seem to be more opportunities in which to feel discouraged, frustrated, or just alienated from “normal” life, whatever that might be. It usually takes a mental time-out with the Lord to get me off my self-pity place. Trust me, I don’t go in for pity parties because there is always someone around with more reason to be there than I have.

Most of the time, the Lord reminds me of the huge difference between where I have been and where I am and that’s all it takes to bring me out of my emotional slump. But other times, I look up and see my wife still with me, still supporting me and looking for me to support her. Or I might be walking down the hall at work when someone passes in the opposite direction, offering a greeting and a smile.

Back in my prison days, there were some incredibly faithful people who came in once a week for Bible study. The program was called “Faith at Work” and it was indeed that. I’m pretty sure that many of them knew the offenses we had. They didn’t ask us but somehow it seemed easy to share that information with them, to be encouraged by their prayers, and to know that next week they would return yet another time. And you know what? They always smiled and called each of us by name.

This whole business of encouragement has been rattling around in my mind for several weeks now, gnawing at me with the notion that it was an important message, but little more than that. Maybe the word is there because so many letters I get mention the importance of a visit, a letter, or any kind of contact that rises above their being recognized only as one who has molested or sexually assaulted someone. And just as often, it is the absence of things like visits and letters that stands out.

I was lucky because I had family support while I was in prison and there *were* people who encouraged me in many ways. Because of their encouragement, I was able to take one day at a time with the notion that I had the ability to make each day better than the last. Most men I have met over the years don’t have that support and one day is pretty much the same as the day before.

For this reason, I think it makes sense to approach the idea of encouragement coming not necessarily from others as a starting place but from someplace deep within ourselves, that place where God resides in our hearts if we allow Him to exist there. The verses above offer a series of steps worth looking at more closely.

From being united with Christ

My own arrest felt like I had disconnected myself from God because, after all, I had sinned in a way that was so dark. I had chosen to sin against His little ones. But God’s mercy was and is far greater than my ability to believe myself unable to receive it. From where I sat, either Jesus died for my sins or He didn’t. And if He did, He died for me, for you, for all of us. By that death on the cross, we were all reclaimed. Despite our sins and maybe because of them, we are God’s. That’s encouragement.

Comfort from His love

This is where the rubber of faith hit the road as far as I was concerned because to find comfort in His love, I had to acknowledge it and accept it.

For the longest time, I thought to myself “God forgives me but I will never forgive myself.” Such an idea is, I think, meant to somehow make the one who says it feel nobler. It is the ultimate “I take full responsibility for what I have done” but it fails to recognize that forgiveness of self comes in a distant, really distant second place to God’s forgiveness.

In that light, refusing to forgive myself meant I had placed myself above God. Boy, if you are looking for a simple example of pride, this would be it. So if you have not yet forgiven yourself, let go of that notion, trust in God, and then accept what is yours for eternity—God’s love. That’s encouragement.

Fellowship with the Spirit

I really had to think about this part because I knew I could get all caught up in complicated thinking if I wasn’t careful. So here is my simplified version.

At some point after my arrest, I made a decision that God would be with me, would protect me, and would continue to draw me close. I also decided that if the occasion arose, I would tell others that the Holy Spirit dwelled within me—just as the Spirit dwells in all who believe.

Because of that belief, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit *all* became more real for me and were a part of everything I did. I also realized that the Holy Spirit encouraged me to have a connection with others, from those closest to those who were complete strangers. The simple message: fellowship means we are never alone. That’s encouragement.

Tenderness and Compassion

It was really hard for me to accept love and compassion as one that harmed so many even though people around offered it to me. In response I would say “Thank you” but my insides were saying “I wish they would treat me as I deserve to be treated.” They were offering goodness and I wanted punishment.

Eventually I surrendered my attitude and the resulting freedom made it possible for me to have a deep gratitude for all those acts of kindness I didn't believe should be mine. And with that freedom also came the understanding that the best love is that which is freely given, the love which is not earned. That's encouragement.

Make my joy complete -- Be Like-minded

Good people will tell you things like "Hang in there," "You're doing fine," "I appreciated what you said in group," or "I can tell that there's been a change in you." I believe that they are encouragers who have found a personal connection with God, who accept and believe in God's love, who appreciate the fellowship of the Spirit and of others, and who have themselves experienced tenderness and compassion.

Because they have these things, they know that sharing with others will not ever empty the personal well of goodness that fills daily and that is never empty. They have learned to be like-minded. That's encouragement.

A Good Cycle

Early on in this article I wrote that encouragement must start from some place deep within. This is something I believe and I hope you will as well. Consider the steps I've outlined and ask God to make them yours.

In the past 22 years since my arrest, however, I've learned that I could always be a *receiver* of encouragement, but if I wanted more than that I would have to become an encourager myself for others. We are ALL called to be encouragers for others.

We don't have to wait until all life's problems have been ironed out. We don't have to be out of prison to start. In fact, if we start encouraging others even though we need encouraging ourselves, the wave of goodness we send out will flow back in our direction. Good stuff works that way, so be encouraged. □



Our Prayer Corner

Prayer is an incredible gift we can give one another, for there is no better thing than to lift our lives, hopes, and dreams to the altar of the Lord.

Let us pray . . .

- First and always foremost, for our victims, that each day for them is a new day, a day without fear, and a day of healing.
- For 10 years of *Into the Light*, that God continues to bless this outreach of hope and encouragement.
- For those nearing the end of their sentences, that release and freedom will be a reality.
- For those who are being considered for civil commitment, that they know God is with them in all things and wants them to have the peace of His presence.
- For churches, that they consider themselves as places of healing and reconciliation for ALL who seek communion with them.
- For those affected by residency restrictions, that they trust God to provide for their needs.
- For Bob, that he continues to listen for the voice of the Lord in all things; that his life be filled with healthy balance and accountability; and that he has the time needed to do everything.
- (As always) For those who are still abusing, that they will come to understand the devastation they bring on their victims and that they seek help for themselves—whatever the cost.

This newsletter is made possible by the donations of its readers and would cease to exist without that support. Please consider a tax-exempt donation to Broken Yoke Ministries, PO Box 361, Waukesha, WI 53187-0361. And if you cannot contribute, please pray!



Broken Yoke Ministries is celebrating 20 years of ministry this year. *Into the Light* is celebrating 10 years. Begun in 1997 with a mailing list of 43, we now mail to 2149 individuals, enter 416 institutions, and continue to grow! God is not only good—God is GREAT!

Everyone needs a retreat

I went to a Trappist monastery in early August for a 3-day retreat. It was a wonderful, quiet, stress-reducing, and above all, God-centered time. I tried to listen for God as much as I prayed, but I know I still need work in the listening department. Thankfully, it's getting better, though.

If you think about it, there are ways to make a retreat regardless of where you might be, even if your retreat is only an hour a day. Consider doing that. You won't be disappointed.

Special Prayer Request

**2007 International Conference
Coalition of Prison
Evangelists
September 26-29
Dallas (Plano), TX**



A significant opportunity has come in the form of being asked to co-teach a workshop on ministry to sex offenders with Jack Ruth (Pure Life Ministries). Jack is active in prison ministry using books on sexual addiction written by Steve Gallagher, director of Pure Life.

This workshop will, I'm sure, stir a lot of interest among the many prison ministry leaders attending, so I am asking you all to be in prayer for Jack, me, and all who attend.

As a member of COPE and also of the National Convocation of Jail and Prison Ministry, I can assure you that the members of these two organizations truly serve those in confinement, so the chance to have some meaningful conversation with people who really care is a blessing. Again, pray with and for us!

All things are possible with God!

Bits & Pieces

From a letter: "Good character is not given to us. We have to build it piece by piece—by thought, choice, courage, and determination."

The editor of Catholic Digest has agreed to discuss ministry to sex offenders from a church perspective in the September online version of that magazine. He sent a draft of his Editor's Column to me and I found it to be very balanced. He used material from my booklets as conversation points and invited readers to become part of the discussion. I felt very blessed by his willingness to open this door to possible understanding. [Bob]

From a letter: "Jesus has come. He has come and He won't be discouraged by our pessimism. He understands our wickedness and knows it is not unto death. He is willing to stand on the end of despair but rejects the notion of joining us there. He has come to rescue us. He sees the pilot light and is about to turn on the gas!"

From a letter:

I asked God for strength—God gave me difficulties to make me strong.

I asked for wisdom—God gave me problems to solve.

I asked for prosperity—God gave me brains and brawn to work.

I asked for courage—God gave me danger to overcome.

I asked for love—God gave me troubled people to help.

I asked for favors—God gave me opportunities.

I received nothing I wanted—I received everything I needed. Anon.

From a letter: "I am trying to get a counseling program started here as one-third of the camp is sex offenders. The new warden has no problem with that idea provided we have someone to sponsor it. I found a professional willing to do that but he needed foundational materials to use. We found material through SA but still have no class. It seems someone at the state level is against the idea. We sure can use some prayer."

From a letter: (An analogy between unwanted thoughts and a television ad) "We can take all the care in the world to screen out unwanted programs or stations on the TV but we are subject to the commercials that come with them. No matter how quick we are with the remote, the damage is already done, but we don't have to watch the whole ad. Mute it, look away, and don't dwell on it." Our brains don't have to be watching TV for thoughts and images to appear, but we can still take preventive measures. Think about it.

The State of Florida already has a statewide law restricting sex offenders to beyond 1000 feet of schools, daycare centers, etc. WCTV recently reported that the city of Perry, FL, is trying to pass an ordinance of 2500 feet.

There were a number of letters commenting both negatively and positively on "Another Story to Share" by Brian. I do appreciate response to the material in this newsletter and work hard to make what I share with you relevant and accurate.

Sharing with You

By Scott

I was not born a child molester but I became one. From an early age I became captured by all things sexual. At some time in my adolescence, I viewed a pornographic movie that portrayed a grandfather grooming his granddaughter and eventually having sex with her.

I took these images and stored them away along with all the rest of the lust I was saving in my mind. The moral implications were obvious to me and I was openly opposed to the idea of those types of abuses actually occurring.

But as I ventured through other fetishes and lust experiences, crossing lines and needing ever more increasing stimuli to satisfy myself, I eventually came to a place in life where opportunity to molest a minor presented itself. And so I did.

This wasn't an act I was born to do. It was merely the next thing to do. Left unchecked, I'm convinced I would have tried anything that popped into my mind. Harming my children was and is a serious problem, and I'll be forever vigilant about my true motives with regard to minors in the future.

I've opened Pandora's Box and exposed myself to molestation which has become part of what makes me tick. But the real problem, the much larger problem is and always has been my warped need for self-gratification.

I think of what John the Baptist said: "I must decrease as He must increase." This is our only hope. The key to this is self-honesty, the narrow gate. Looked at in this fashion, one of the greatest gifts we can receive is that of discernment. We need to see ourselves clearly so we can choose to get out of the way. We can choose to decrease.

[The lives and backgrounds shared with me in the letters that come to Broken Yoke sometimes have similarities, those points where anyone reading that letter might say "I understand." But each story is unique and, as I often share with others, there are no cookie cutter people, no story where every detail or interpretation of that detail matches our own.

I believe in those who write and I pray that the journey they are on continues to draw them to God. None of us can demand that another person must be where we believe the person should be, nor that change and understanding happens for anyone else according to our timing. We are what we are in any given moment and it is up to us to decide whether we go forward or backward from that point.

Every day I am blessed to read of the miracle of transformation in men and women for whom the world holds little hope. And every day I am personally reminded that I myself have not yet finished the race. My journey is like yours in that we must all be dependent on God, willing to acknowledge our sins, and even more willing to learn and grow in the healthy choices we are called to make. Bob]



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All things are possible with God

Dated Material

A Little Humor



While on a road trip, the elderly couple stopped at a roadside restaurant for lunch. After finishing their meal, they resumed their trip. Unknowingly, the woman left her glasses on the table and didn't miss them until they had been driving about twenty minutes. By then, and to add to the aggravation, they had to travel quite a distance before finding a place to turn around.

All the way back, the husband fussed and complained and scolded his wife. As she got out of the car and hurried inside to retrieve her glasses, he yelled to her, "While you're in there, you might as well get my hat and credit card!"