

February 18, 2007 by Steve Brandon



# Build Up One Another

## Philemon 1-7

- 1. Express Your Thankfulness (verse 4).**
- 2. Reveal God's Working (verse 5).**
- 3. Seek Their Benefit (verse 6).**
- 4. Share Your Blessing (verse 7).**

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). This is so true. Your words have the ability to tear down and destroy someone's life. And your words have the ability to build up and to encourage someone's life. I have counseled with men whose fathers had nothing but criticism for them. It was as if they were constantly being beaten and torn down with their words, never being good enough to please dad. As a result, they felt exasperated, and lost heart in life (Col. 3:21). On the other hand, the encouraging word goes a long way. The Proverbs are clear: "Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances" (Prov. 25:11). Our words can be as precious and special as a fine setting of jewelry. "How delightful is a timely word" (Prov. 15:23). When the encouraging word comes at the right moment, it becomes a source of life and hope. This morning, I ask you, "How are your words?" Do they tear down? Do they bring death? Or, do they build up? Do they promote life?

In our exposition of the book of Philemon, we will have the opportunity to see Paul building up his brother Philemon. Please consider our text:

Philemon 1-7

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

In order to catch the effect of these words, you need to catch them in context. Paul is about to speak some difficult words to Philemon. He is going to ask him to receive back his runaway slave. He is going to ask him to forgive his runaway slave. He is going to ask him to restore his runaway slave. This was going to be a difficult thing for Philemon to hear.

Paul knows how difficult this will be for Philemon. So, before he gets to it in verse 10, Paul first speaks about Philemon. Paul wanted Philemon to know of his love and affection for him. He wanted to convince Philemon that he was for him, not against him. He first wanted to build him up in the Lord. As Paul did so, it was his desire to see that he would be open to receiving the difficult word that would follow.

My message this morning is entitled, "Build Up One Another." Indeed, this is what Paul was accomplishing in verses 4-7. Paul is building up Philemon and encouraging him and demonstrating that God was working in His life. Paul wanted Philemon to know that Paul had noticed these things.

At this point, we really need to step back a bit. If you are in the position of confronting another believer, or telling him (or her) something that would be very difficult for them to hear, or asking him (or her) to do something very hard to do, it is wise to build them up first. It is wise to demonstrate your care and concern and love toward them first. And when they are convinced of your love for them and when they are convinced that you have their good in mind, it's at that moment that you have prepared them for the difficult words. Long before the surgeon takes his scalpel in hand and cuts into his patient, he first prepares the way. He talks with the patient about the procedure. He cleans the wound with some betadine. He applies the local anesthesia. And only then does he use his scalpel. So also with relationships. If you have a corrective word that you are bringing to a brother or a sister in Christ, it is wise and strategic to prepare the way with words of affirmation and with expressions of love.

This past week, I heard the testimony of a woman that I knew when she was about 10 years old. She grew up in a great church with great parents. But, throughout her teen years, she underwent a period of time in her life where she was rebellious to the ways of God. Eventually, she was involved in a relationship with a man from another country which neither of her parents nor her friends approved of. In the course of events, they conceived a child out of wedlock. It was devastating to her (and to her family). Yet, she repented of her sin and was restored into the fellowship of the church. As she reflected back upon her poor relationship, she said that none of her friends confronted her rightly about it. She said that the only time that any of her friends talked with her about this was when she was in a large group of her friends. They would simply scold her and tell her how bad the relationship was. Never did any of her friends build her up with encouraging words, only later to confront her gently about these things.

Before Paul ever applied the scalpel of confrontation, he prepared the way for a good reception using words of affirmation first.

This morning, I want to take my message beyond preparing the way for a confrontation. I want to bring my message into the realm of everyday interaction among those within the body of Christ. The Scriptures would teach us that we ought always to be building others up with our words. It's not just in the day of confrontation that we need to encourage and strengthen other believers with our words. It may just be the case that your years of edification prepare the way for the day of confrontation. We need to be building up others constantly. Ephesians 4:29 is one text that would show this clearly. Paul writes, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear." The exhortation here applies to all of life. It applies to our speech and the things that we say to one another. As followers of Christ, "no unwholesome word [ought to] proceed from our mouths."

This includes all forms of profanity. It includes all forms of slander. It includes all forms of hate-filled words that would tear others down. It included all words of mockery. It includes all words that would embarrass another believer. Rather, as followers of Christ, the only words that should proceed from our mouths are those that are "good for edification according to the need of the moment." The word here translated, "edification" is a construction word which literally means, "to build a house." The idea is simply that your words should be used to "build up" one another. We should look at everybody as a construction project in process. The studs are up. The house is taking shape. We need to do our part to complete the building. We need to put on the exterior walls, staple the Tyvek, apply the siding, install the plumbing, run the electrical wires, tack on the insulation, put up the dry wall, apply the paint, put down the floors, and put on the trim. We can do this in the lives of people with our words of encouragement. All of us are in different stages in life and need the words of others to build us up, "according to the need of the moment" (Eph. 4:29).

So, what are these words that build up? To explain what they are, I want to quote from C. J. Mahaney. In recent months, his life has been a great example to me of someone seeking to work hard at building up others around him. He has created a church that does this so well. I want for Rock Valley Bible Church to imitate Covenant Life Church in these areas. He wrote an excellent book entitled, "Humility." In this book, he was commenting upon Ephesians 4:29 when he said the following:

"What are edifying words? Here's what they're not. They're not simply polite words. [Ephesians 4:29] isn't an exhortation to niceness or social protocol. And it certainly isn't talking about flattery or about superficial words or about compliments that are man-centered or man-exalting.

Truly edifying words are words that reveal the character and the promises and the activity of God. They're cross-centered words. They're words rooted in and derived from Scripture, words that identify the active presence of God, and words that communicate the evidences of grace that you observe in others. They're words that flow from a humble heart.

We're commanded to communicate only words like these that are good for building up another. What a sweet command! What a privilege!

Since Scripture informs us that God is at work in every soul that has been truly regenerated, we have this joy of bringing to the attention of every Christian in our relational world how we perceive God to be at work in their lives. We get to enter their lives, discern how God is actively present, draw attention to that, and then celebrate it! And so we leave behind a soul that has been built up and edified. [\[1\]](#)

This is my aim this morning: I want to use the words of Paul to Philemon as words to help us to understand how it is that we can "build up one another." Here's my first point.

## **1. Express Your Thankfulness (verse 4).**

Paul begins the building up process in verse 4, "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints."

Expressing his thankfulness was a constant theme of Paul's life. If you should survey Paul's epistles, you would find that the vast majority of them begin with an expression of thankfulness to God for those to whom he is writing. To the Romans, Paul wrote, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world" (Rom. 1:8). To the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:4). To the Colossians, Paul wrote, "We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you" (Col. 1:3). To the Thessalonians, Paul wrote, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers" (1 Thess. 1:2). And here, in our text this morning, Paul expressed his thankfulness to God for Philemon.

When you look carefully at the ways in which Paul expresses his thanks, you see that he didn't merely have a formulaic way that he began all of his letters. It's not like he said that same exact words in each of his letters. No, he thought through the particulars of why he was thankful to God for those to whom he wrote. For the Romans, Paul was particularly thankful that their faith in Christ was being made known throughout the whole world. For the Corinthians, Paul was thankful for the grace of God which was working in them. For those in Philippi, Paul was thankful that they had joined him in the fight for the gospel. For the Colossians, Paul was thankful simply that they were believers in Christ! For those in Thessalonica, Paul was thankful for the ways in which they had labored hard for the cause of Christ. Here in Philemon, Paul was thankful for the ways in which his faith in Christ and love toward all the saints manifest themselves.

Paul often gave thanks for those to whom he wrote. But, what I really want you to notice at this point is that Paul is going beyond merely being thankful. And this should be obvious, but it bears noting. First of all, Paul expressed his thankfulness to God in prayer. But second, he told Philemon of how thankful to God he was. He told Philemon of how often he prayed with thanksgiving on his heart for Philemon. This was quite intentional. Paul wanted Philemon to be fully aware of the fact that Paul was thankful for him and that he was constantly thanking the Lord for his life.

The application for all of us this morning is clear. How thankful are you to God for those around you. Are you thankful for your spouse? Are you thankful for your children? Children, are you thankful for your parents? Are you thankful for this church family? Are you thankful for other Christians outside of this body?

It's quite easy for us to answer "yes" to all of these questions. However, what about the next series. Do you express your thanks to God for them? Do you pray prayers of thanksgiving for your spouse? Do you pray for your children? Children, are you praying prayers of thanksgiving for your parents? Do you thank God for this church family? Do you thank God for other Christians outside of this body?

Again, this might be easy to affirm. However, the final step may prove to expose an area of needed growth. Are you communicating with others how thankful you are to God for them? How often do you tell your spouse that you are thankful to the Lord that you have the privilege of sharing house and home with him or her? How often do you tell your children that you are thankful to God for them? Children, how often are you telling your parents that you are thankful to God for them? How often are you telling others in this church family how thankful you are to God for them? How often are you expressing your thanks to God for others in the universal body of who are outside of this church? Here was Paul, in a Roman prison, telling a man, some 800 miles away, through a letter, that he was constantly thanking the Lord for him. Certainly, it was building him up and encouraging him.

I was confronted about my lack yesterday evening when I discussed my message with my children. As I was going over these things, one of my children asked me, "Dad, do you pray for us?" Yvonne and I do pray for our children, almost every night. But, I guess I had failed to communicate with them how we had been praying for them. How edifying would it be for my children if I would simply tell them that I was thankful to God for them, praying often for them! What a difference it would make if they knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that mom and dad prayed for them every day. This is the testimony of my own father. He's constantly telling me of how often he and my mother are praying for me. It is extremely edifying.

As a pastor, I need to be more actively communicating these things to you. As a pastor, I need to be better at pointing out these things in the presence of others. It's a way to build you up in the faith. And so, I'm preaching to myself this morning as much as I am preaching to you. Oh, let's be a church where these things take place often!

Let's turn to our next point, because it is here that we see exactly the types of things that Paul is thankful for. How can you build up one another? (1) Express Your Thankfulness (verse 4); and ...

## **2. Reveal God's Working (verse 5).**

This comes in verse 5, which reads, "because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints." These words express the core of why Paul was thankful for Philemon. Notice, that these words aren't man-centered. They aren't words communicating how great Philemon is. Rather, they are words communicating how great God is to be working in his life.

In this instance, Paul is revealing the way in which God has been active in Philemon's life. Philemon had demonstrated a faith and love toward Christ and toward all the believers. Philemon's love for the saints was unquestioned. He had also demonstrated a strong faith in the Lord, which all were able to see. Paul wanted to identify these things in Philemon's life, and bring them to light. In this way, Paul was building up Philemon by communicating with him these words of encouragement. Because, it is very encouraging to hear others tell you of how God is working in your life. Isn't it?

Suppose that someone came up to you this morning and pulled you aside to tell you the following: "I just want for you to know that I'm thankful to the Lord for you. Over the past few months I have been observing you. I have seen the joy of the Lord on your face. It's an evidence of your faith in Christ. You have an incredible love for the saints. I have seen how you have gone out of your way to serve other people in the church. I have seen your love for your family. I have noticed the way in which you are raising your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. You have prioritized the Lord in your family. I want you to know that I've been praying prayers of thanksgiving to the Lord for the ways in which He has been working so clearly in your life." Now, what would that do to your soul? Wouldn't you be encouraged? Wouldn't it build you up in the faith? I know that it would. It would be a means of grace. Ephesians 4:29 says that the good word of edification "will give grace to those who hear." Do you want to give grace?

I saw an example of this last week, when I was in DeKalb, preaching at Kishwaukee Bible Church (which planted our church). After church, we went out to lunch with an old friend of ours. When Yvonne and I were just married and engaged in the work of planting Kishwaukee Bible Church, we had this friend of ours over for dinner several times each month. He was single at the time, with no prospects in sight. Last summer, he was married, at age 44. We came to his wedding. It was a great, God-honoring wedding. The ceremony was so focused upon Christ. The reception afterwards was conducted in such a way that God received much glory. During the reception, the maid of honor and best man were given the opportunity to say a few words to the couple. Their comments were so God-honoring. Their faith in the Lord was clearly seen through the service that they had planned. We heard about their faith from the various testimonies that were given by those who knew them well. We heard about their love for the saints through these testimonies as well.

At lunch last Sunday afternoon, I had the opportunity to tell him how appreciative I was for the way in which his entire wedding ceremony and reception was so delightful, because it was so focused upon the Lord. I could see a smile in each of their faces a mile wide. As I shared these things, they became aware of the working of God in their lives to plan and carry through with a God-honoring wedding and reception. Yvonne and I had a chance to build them up, by communicating to them of our thanks to the Lord for the way in which He was exalted in and through their wedding festivities. In so doing, we were giving grace to them. It was my joy to say these things. It was their joy to hear them. That's what Paul is doing here with Philemon. He is identifying God's working in His life and revealing it.

And you need to see that this isn't only a private communication. No, it should be public. It should be for all to see. It should be for all to hear. In the first three verses, we see that this was a letter beyond Philemon. It's written to Philemon (as verse 1 indicates). But, in verse 2, we see

that this letter was also written to Apphia and to Archippus and to the entire church body that was gathered in Philemon's home (verse 2). This is a public identification and revelation of how God was working through this man's life. And so, as you reveal God's working in someone's life, be public about it.

Write an email and copy others who would be particularly blessed by it. Share these things in our prayer meeting. Share these things in a Flock setting. Share these things in a group after church. Share these things around the dinner table. As you speak this way about others, God will be honored and others will be built up.

### **3. Seek Their Benefit (verse 6).**

By this, I simply mean that you should seek that others are prosperous in their Christian lives. You should seek that God would strengthen them, that God would not withhold any good thing from them (Ps. 84:11b), that God would bless their efforts, and that God would build His kingdom through them. Seek their benefit. Seek their well-being. Seek their spiritual prosperity. Seek their blessing.

This is what Paul communicates in verse 6, "I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake." Now, it's difficult to know here exactly what Paul means by each of these words and phrases. Somehow, Paul wants Philemon's faith to be shared by many. As others share in his faith, Paul wants to see this have an effect. The effect will be that many will have a full knowledge of "every good thing." Ultimately, this will guide many to Christ. How you put all of that together is difficult. However, I believe that the main point is simple: Paul is desirous of seeing Philemon's faith have its full effect upon all. Paul wants to see Philemon's faith to be the avenue of great blessing upon the church and great blessing upon those in Colossae.

This is how he is praying. He is praying that Philemon's faith might be effective in the work of God's kingdom. In this way, Paul is ultimately seeking good things for Philemon. He longs to see Philemon be blessed of the Lord in his ministry.

Such a longing takes great humility. Like the disciples, we all want to be first. We want to sit at the right and at the left of Jesus in His kingdom. When others are blessed in their faith, there is often a jealousy toward them, that God has blessed them and not me! After James and John requested that they sit on the right and left of Jesus in His kingdom, "the ten began to feel indignant with [them]." Among church members there can be a longing for spiritual success as well. "I want to be the teacher. I want to be up front. I want to be the leader. I want to have the power in the church." But Paul's longing wasn't like this at all. He wanted Philemon's faith to spread far and wide. He wanted Philemon's ministry to prosper. Even when he, himself, was in prison, he earnestly desired for Philemon's ministry to soar.

Among many pastors today, there is a great jealousy that exists when other churches are receiving great blessing, but their church isn't. I have felt it. I have felt the tension of meeting with other pastors in town, whose ministries appear to be going better than my ministry at Rock Valley Bible Church. There is something that stirs in my heart against their successes! When we have had people leave our church and go to their churches, it's a hard deal for me. It's hard for me, only because of my pride.

And yet, I'm working hard to see that other churches are prospering. I have a list of churches that I pray for each week, usually on Saturday evening (or Sunday morning). I pray that God would bless their ministries. I pray for the preaching of the Word on Sunday. I pray for the Spirit to come upon them and grow and prosper. With some of these churches, I exchange an email with their pastors throughout the week. I tell them what I'm preaching on. They tell me what they are preaching on. And so, when I pray for them, I pray through their texts of Scripture they will be expounding on Sunday, pouring my heart out to the Lord that He would bless their ministry and that their churches would prosper.

With other churches on my list, I'm not close enough with the pastor to be in weekly communication with them. But, I've still continued to pray for them every week for these past 4 ½ years since I have lived in Rockford. There are about 10 churches in town that I have committed myself to pray for God's blessing to be upon them. They aren't all in our camp, believing everything that we believe. But, I believe them to be doing a good work. My heart is that God would bless them in their work. As I have run into these pastors in various capacities, I have been able to tell them, "I pray for your ministry every week. Especially, I've been praying for the Lord to prosper your Sunday morning ministry for His glory." I trust as I have been able to tell this to others, that they have been encouraged and built up in the faith.

When you can say to others that you have a longing that God would bless them mightily, it will find resonance in their hearts and they will be built up as a result of your words. The reason for this is really quite simple. Expressing your desire in this way is demonstrating to them that you are for them and not against them. They are encouraged that you are on the same team.

The Christian life can be so discouraging at times. We need others to come alongside of us and build us up. This isn't done by telling us how good we are. We don't need people building up our self-esteem. That will only turn our attention upon ourselves, and thus, away from Christ. We need others to come alongside of us and encourage us in the work of the ministry. We need others to help us to see that they want God to be magnified in our lives! As much as we need others to help us with these things, we need to be these people, who are telling this to others. My heart's desire is that all of you would be the construction workers who help build up the lives of other people with your words.

### **4. Share Your Blessing (verse 7).**

Consider verse 7, "For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." In this verse, Paul is telling Philemon of how Philemon's life has been a blessing to Paul. "Through your life, Philemon, I have derived much joy. You have made me very happy. Also, I have derived much comfort. When I have been discouraged, I have thought of what the Lord has done through you, and I have been encouraged."

Paul's encouragement came as a result of the way that the Lord had chosen to bless Philemon's ministry. Philemon was a man who loved other people. Paul saw how Philemon's love refreshed the hearts of many believers. And in seeing that, Paul was greatly encouraged, and told Philemon that his life was a source of great blessing for Paul. Paul was sharing the blessing that this man had been in his life.

There is something that takes place in the hearts of Christians when they behold another Christian walking with the Lord. It is a huge encouragement to them. It is a great blessing to see others living in the power of the Spirit. When you communicate that blessing to others, it actually becomes a means of building others up as well. And so, I exhort you, church family, "share your blessing." As you see the Lord working in the lives of others and you are strengthened by it, inform them of your blessing. In turn, it will build them up!

You may be asking, what things should I look for? Again, I want to turn to C. J. Mahaney for an answer to this question. He writes, ...

Where do we find and identify these evidences of grace? And how will we know them when we see them?

Here's where I encourage you to start: Be intimately familiar with the list of the fruit of the Spirit--"Joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Make a practice of observing how the Spirit manifests these traits in the lives you see around you.

Likewise, familiarize yourself with the lists of the Spirit's gifts (see Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 and 12:28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 4:11) and observe the Spirit equipping believers to teach, to lead, and to serve. And remember that these lists aren't exhaustive but just a sampling of the gifting the Spirit provides.

When you become familiar with the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit and learn to recognize their manifestation, suddenly you will be aware that God is at work *everywhere!* Look anywhere and you'll see evidences of God's activity, evidences of grace. What a joy and privilege it is to discern this activity in the lives of those we love and care for--and to draw their attention to how God is at work in their lives. [\[2\]](#)

Look for the fruit of the Spirit, and call attention to it when you see it. Look for the gifts of the Spirit and call attention to it. I know that when you see another believer in Christ demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit, your heart is refreshed. When someone is demonstrating a great heart of **love** toward other people, you are encouraged by their sacrifice. When you encounter another believer who is experiencing the **joy** of the Lord, it blesses your own heart. When tragedy strikes in the life of another, and yet, they have a **peace** about it, your own faith is strengthened, knowing that if such a tragedy struck you, your same God would be able to give you the same peace. When you see a member of the body going through a tremendously painful trial, but enduring it with great **patience**, you become more convinced of the Lord's compassion and mercy to sustain the one experiencing a trial (James 5:11). When you observe another believer extending **kindness** to those who are in desperate need of help, you are encouraged because you see the love of Jesus working through them. When you see someone overcoming evil with **good**, you know that they have come to the point that they are trusting in the Lord to deal appropriately with those who have sought to hurt them (Rom. 12:21). When you observe a believer who is **faithful** in all his ways, your heart is encouraged to follow his example. When you see someone using a **gentle** answer to turn away a wrathful accusation, your heart longs for a similar wisdom (Prov. 15:1). When you see a fellow believer be tempted in great ways, but demonstrate **self-control**, it's encouraging, knowing that the Lord is able to provide a way of escape for you also (1 Cor. 10:13).

As you receive a blessing from observing people walk through life victoriously like this, tell them how you see the Spirit working in their life. Tell them, ...

The fruit of the Spirit is working in your life. You have a great **love** that can only be explained by the Spirit of God (John 13:34-35). It's obvious that the **joy** of the Lord is your strength (Neh. 8:10). Your **peace** in this tragedy passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7). You will inherit the promises of God because of your **patience** (Heb. 6:12). I can tell that you have tasted of the **kindness** of the Lord (1 Pet. 2:3). The **goodness** of the Lord has surely passed before your eyes (Ex. 33:19). God's mercies are new to you every morning, extending His **faithfulness** to you each and every day (Lam. 3:23). Your wisdom is from above, as you are **gentle** and full of mercy (James 3:17). I can tell that you aren't constrained by the law, your **self-control** comes from within (Gal. 5:23).

If these types of things come from your lips with any degree of regularity, you will be building up people all over the place. We will start to call you Barnabas, which means "Son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36). And so, in your dealings with people, ...

1. Express Your Thankfulness (verse 4). Tell others that you are constantly giving thanks to the Lord for them.
2. Reveal God's Working (verse 5). Identify and bring to light the ways God is working in the lives of others.
3. Seek Their Benefit (verse 6). Convince people that you are for them and not against them.
4. Share Your Blessing (verse 7). As you see God's Spirit working in a person's lives, share what it has done to your own soul.

If you do these things, the church will be built up. We will all be strengthened. You will be able to confront the sin of other people.

Well, I can hear your objections to me right now. "Steve, you don't understand. This is all fine and good for people like Philemon. It's easy to build him up! There are so many good things in him that anybody can see how God has been working in his life. But, you don't understand my situation. I know a brother in the Lord who has been very difficult to deal with. The fruit in his life is minimal. How can I build him up? To make matters worse, he has said some pretty terrible things about me. He has done some awful things to me. How can I build him up?"

To this, I simply say, "Look hard. Look hard for something to commend in them. Work diligently to think of what you can identify in your fellow believer as evidence that the Lord is working in them, even if they have hurt you. Overcome evil with good. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth."

Paul did this. Think with me about the church in Corinth. Of any church that we know of, they were a fleshly, sinful church. Just think with me about the church in Corinth. They were a divided church, with different factions following different leaders, rather than following Christ (1 Cor. 1:10-13). They were quarrelling with each other (1 Cor. 1:11). They boasted of the immorality that they tolerated (1 Cor. 5). Some were taking each other to court, suing each other (1 Cor. 6). Some were involved in sexual sin (1 Cor. 6-7). Some were using their freedom in Christ to sin against fellow believers (1 Cor. 8:12). Some were coming to the Lord's table drunk (1 Cor. 11). Some were craving the spiritual gifts to puff up their own egos (1 Cor. 12-14). Some were doubting the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15). By all standards today, their church was a mess!

How would you build them up? What would you say to this church? You would have to look pretty hard to build them up, wouldn't you. But, Paul found a way to build them up. Consider what he wrote to them (1 Cor. 1:4-9), ...

#### 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is really quite astonishing when you think about it. The church in Corinth was a disaster. But Paul gave thanks to the Lord for the way in which "the grace of God ... was given you in Christ Jesus" (verse 4). He said, "in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge" (verse 5). He gave assurance that Jesus would "confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 8).

How can Paul speak this way? Because he's on the lookout for whatever he can say to edify the believers in Corinth. We might easily write them off, but Paul didn't. He encouraged them instead and built them up, that they might be ready for his rebukes that come later in the letter. And so, in all this language this morning about building up other believers, I'm not losing sight of the rebukes that need to come. Because, rebukes need to come. That is the context in which these words are written.

Jesus did the same thing. I want for you to consider with me portions of Revelation, chapter 2. In this chapter, Jesus is sending messages to the churches in Asia minor. He is writing to a wide variety of churches. Some are excellent churches, in need of no reproof, only encouragement to persevere. Others are terrible churches, who have tolerated false teaching and sinful behavior. The others are somewhere in between. Throughout this chapter, we find Jesus building up the churches wherever He could. Let's look first at the church at Ephesus. This comes in the first seven verses of Revelation, chapter 2. Jesus said, ...

#### Revelation 2:2-4

I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Do you see how Jesus addressed this situation? Before He ever came to the point of telling those in Ephesus what they were doing wrong, He first commended them for what they did right. I know your deeds (verse 2). You are doing good things. I know your toil (verse 2). You are working hard. I know your perseverance (verse 2). You aren't giving up. I know that you cannot tolerate evil men (verse 2). You are taking a stand on sin! I know that "you put to test those who call themselves apostles, and are not, and you found them to be false" (verse 2). You are concerned about false doctrine and test what others are teaching. I know that you have perseverance (verse 3). You are a church that has never thrown in the towel. I know that you have endured for My name's sake (verse 3). You are a church that has pressed on through many difficulties. I know that you have not grown weary (verse 3). You are a church that has ceased in working for God. But, despite all of these good things that I see in you, there is something that I need to tell you. "I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (verse 4).

In these words, Jesus is demonstrating a heart of care and concern for the church in Ephesus. He is gentle with them. He is encouraging them with his words. He wants to affirm to those in Ephesus that His words are coming to them as from a friend, not from an enemy. He is encouraged by them and their actions. He is pleading with them that they would return to where they began.

To some extent, Jesus does the same with the other churches he addresses with difficult words. He does so with differing degrees and in different measure. To the church in Smyrna, Jesus tells them, ...

#### Revelation 2:9-10

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you in prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Smyrna was a good church experiencing some very real difficulties. Jesus told them that they are soon to face about ten days of difficult persecution. After this tribulation, you are going to die. But, in this tribulation, they were to be encouraged, because Jesus knew of the difficulties you are facing. I know your tribulation (verse 9). Your suffering is great. I know your poverty (verse 9). You have little in this world (but much in the world to come). I know the blasphemy you are enduring (verse 9). You have been slandered much. Be encouraged that after you die, I will give you life indeed. These were words that edified them.

Consider now the church in Pergamum. Jesus said to this church, "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My

name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells" (Rev. 2:13). I know where you live (verse 13). You live in a difficult place, where Satan has a stronghold all around you. I know how you held fast to My name (verse 13). You have remained faithful when scores around you are pressuring you otherwise. I know that you did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas (verse 13). You remained faithful to Me even when a local Christian leader was put to death by those in opposition.

Only after this commendation does Jesus confront them with these words, ...

Revelation 2:14-15

But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Some of them held to Balaam's teaching. On the outside, Balaam seemed to be speaking for God, but on the inside, he was a greedy man, interested only in himself. He was against the Jews. He encouraged others to sin, even through acts of sexual immorality. Some of them held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. It's difficult to determine exactly who these people were, but their teaching was bad, and there were some in Pergamum who followed after them. In light of this, the commendation of verse 13 is amazing! Jesus worked hard to identify the working of God in their life.

To the church in Thyatira, Jesus followed a similar pattern. In verse 19, we read Jesus telling this church, "I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first." I see a love in you (verse 19). You have an affection for other people. I see a faith in you (verse 19). You have trusted in Christ. I see your service (verse 19). You have given of yourself to others. I see your perseverance (verse 19). You have continued on in your work. I see that your deeds of late are greater than at first (verse 19). You are improving in your working for the Lord. Jesus then confronts them, "But, I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bondservants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols." Jesus then continues on to speak about the implications of all of these things. It's not good.

In light of what Jesus tells them, verse 19 is a shocker! Before the confrontation comes in verse 20, the encouragement first comes in verse 19. And when you think about a church that tolerates the teaching of an immoral woman, who is seducing the people into acts of wickedness, it would certainly be difficult to find any good in that church. But Jesus does find the good. And, Jesus commends the good.

And so, I send you out, to be a body of believers who is making efforts to build up one another.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 18, 2007 by Steve Brandon.  
For more information see [www.rvbc.cc](http://www.rvbc.cc).

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[1] C. J. Mahaney, Humility, pp. 114-115.

[2] C. J. Mahaney, Humility, p. 101.