

Loving and Encouraging One Another
By Linda Allison

When I first read the e-mail to the elders' and deacons' wives asking us to choose a topic on which to speak at the Ladies' Bible Study on Wednesday nights, my first reaction was "I don't think so!" I know there are many gifted ladies in our church, and I felt that I didn't have anything of "import to impart", as they say! However, there have been various ideas - notions - observations - questions - hovering on the periphery of my thoughts for a while now. I felt as though the Lord was gathering that whole amorphous mass into an articulate whole that I can share with you. I may provoke more questions than answers, but we can help each other, can't we?

I asked if I could speak on encouragement, but a more accurate title would be "Serving and loving one another, prioritizing our time, and not feeling guilty when we can't meet every need."

I want to say at the outset that there is nothing in us that wants to do good - it all comes from the Lord. Any desire to read the Bible, to pray, to be unselfish, generous, kind - none of these things is within us. It's all God. Even the good that unbelievers do is because of common grace. I also want to say that when you are pointing a finger at others, you are pointing three fingers back at yourself. I am speaking to myself even more than I am speaking to you!

Encouragement - we all need it. It can give us strength to continue a difficult task. It can spur us on to new endeavors. It can transform a gloomy, grudging attitude into one of thankfulness. In Hebrews 10: 24-25, it says "*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*" In 1 John 3:14, it says "*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.*" In 1 John 3:18, it says, "*Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*"

There are many, many other verses instructing us to love and serve one another, but you get the point: if we have the honor of calling ourselves by the name Christian, then we should subdue this old flesh, and seek others' good and not our own.

The problem is that there are so many needs, aren't there? On any given Sunday, you can read in the church bulletin that there is a need for nursery workers, Sunday school teachers, AWANA leaders, youth workers, IFO friendship partners, STEP mentors, and volunteers to answer the phone in the church office. That's only the church itself. Individuals need someone to watch their children, drive them to doctor appointments, cook meals, clean house, call them regularly and devote time to listening to their concerns. The list goes on and on. Now, what do you do? You want to serve. After all, we **are** God's hands and feet on this earth, aren't we?

However, it's pretty obvious that there is no way one person can be involved in so many areas. So, what is a Christian woman to do?

There is one thing every single one of us can do and you know exactly what that is: PRAY. Pray specifically. Use the church prayer list. It's updated every week, so you can pray intelligently.

We can let others know we're praying for them and ask how the current situation is going. I will tell you that that is an enormous encouragement when you are going through a trial. I remember when Kenny had leukemia back in 1994. He had to go through chemo treatments and be hospitalized for almost a week, every month for over a year. His blood counts would plummet, making him susceptible to infection. I had a friend who was not only faithful to pray but also kept up with exactly where he was in his chemo cycle. She would say things like, "He had chemo last week didn't he, so how is he feeling right now?" I cannot tell you how encouraging that was to me. It really showed she cared.

So, we should not only pray for each other, but we should pray intelligently.

We can **send cards of encouragement**. (That kind of goes along with letting someone know you're praying for them.) Referring back to the leukemia, Kenny and I received tons of encouraging cards initially. However, there were a couple of ladies who would continue to send "praying for you" cards for several years. When the chemo treatments stopped, there was a very high chance of his losing his remission. Their cards would usually arrive when I was feeling discouraged. It was a precious reminder of our Lord's care for us.

We can **call to encourage someone** and let her know that we are praying and care about her situation. I like to make phone calls when I'm walking my dog. At home, I really don't have much time to spend on the phone. I think that goes for most of us.

Most of us can **make extra meals** to take to someone. Even if we're living on a small income, we could supply bread to go with someone else's meal or a small dessert. We have to cook anyway, so why not just make extra? Now, I say that as though I find it very easy. I will tell you I don't! Not because I don't want to make a meal for someone else but because I'm always worried that they won't like it. I have a standard casserole type dish that I take. Since I don't eat meat, I don't have a clue what it tastes like, but my family likes it. If I have to take a second meal, I panic!!! (Just kidding! I take taco soup.) Bottom line: making a meal for someone else should not be a huge sacrifice.

We can **look for ways to serve** while we are at church. There is always a need for nursery workers. In an ideal situation, no mothers of babies and young children should ever have to serve in the nursery or pre-school. When you have several children, you can spend a lot of time back in the nursery and hardly ever receive spiritual food.

Now, what about the rest? A sudden phone call that someone needs a babysitter, driven to the doctor, just wants to talk for an indefinite amount of time.....you supply the rest. What do you do? Your initial inclination is to say "yes" to everything! I don't have the perfect answer, because there isn't one. We each have to examine our own lives and the demands made upon us already. If you're a homeschooling mother, you often receive calls like that, because people know you're home and assume you're available. They forget that you're educating your children, and that's a full time job. If it's an emergency, of course, you help a friend out by babysitting or driving her somewhere, or spending time with her. However, you can't make it a regular habit or your own children will suffer. If **you're** not teaching them, then nobody else is. Ultimately, you're abdicating your responsibility to them.

Whatever our situation in life: single, married, married with small children, married with older kids, empty nesters, or widowed, we are unique. **We can't compare ourselves to others**, even if they appear to be similarly situated. We all have different levels of stamina, different family relationships, and

different demands on our time.... If you are able to involve yourself in various areas of ministry without causing your family to suffer, then that is great. However, please don't judge someone else who appears to be in a similar situation to yourself and doesn't get as involved as you do. Contrarily, please don't beat yourself up by thinking you're somehow inadequate, because you're not doing as much as your friend.

This is my encouragement to you - and to myself! We do need to love each other in word and deed. **We need to examine our lives and our different commitments.** If we have no time left to help someone else, then that's a problem. However, as long as we are honestly desiring to help each other and endeavoring to meet other's needs without detriment to our own health or families, then we have no need to feel guilty. We are not God. He is! He'll put different people and situations on our hearts at different times, and it should become apparent what He would have us do.

Now, there's another way we can show love to the body and that is by **not taking offense if one of our needs is not being met.** Our church used to have a reputation for being cold. It was said that we knew the Word but we didn't love one another. Unfortunately, I've heard that a few times recently - mainly by those who no longer attend here. That is so very sad that anyone would feel that way. I've thought about it a lot and sought the Lord about it. Here is what I think.

If we truly deny ourselves and love others more than ourselves, then we would only think the best of others and extend grace to them. For example, you say "hello" to someone and they walk on by. Instead of thinking that they're ignoring you, give them grace and assume that they didn't see you or were preoccupied. Perhaps you've been in hospital and very few people from the church came to visit, or you've recently lost a loved one and you didn't receive many condolence cards or - you supply the need. You continually read "thank-you's" in the bulletin for all the cards, visits, meals, etc. accorded to other people who have been ill, lost a loved one, etc. You begin to think that you're not considered as important as they are. **This is your opportunity to extend grace and love.** Do you remember to send a card to everyone who has been ill or has lost a loved one? Do you make time to visit everyone who is in hospital? When you see people at church, do you remember every single person who has recently lost a loved one? If you're like me, then the answer is "no."

It's unfair to put expectations on others. Our hope is in the Lord - **not** in each other. The sad truth is that we will always let each other down. Our responsibility is to do what we know we should be doing - not police everybody else! It's kind of like what they say about a marriage relationship - the husband and wife each giving 100%. We should do our best to give our 100% in our relationship with Christ, whether other believers are doing it or not. We shouldn't keep score!

We should also remember that when we do what is right, we're not doing anything extra. We shouldn't expect a reward. Everything should point back to God (Matt. 5:16 *"Even so, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in Heaven."*) We shouldn't expect recognition or thanks. (Matt. 6:1 -4 *"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ... but when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*)

I have a funny anecdote about that. When Miss Billie Kirkpatrick was still alive, a few of us would take turns going over to visit and clean her house a wee bit. She had over thirteen cats at one point, so it was quite a monumental job trying to keep her house sanitary! :) Anyway, one of my friends, Sandy, was

faithful to go over every week and clean Billie's house as thoroughly as she could. I would visit too, but my visits were much more leisurely - a quick flick of a duster here and there - and then I'd sit down to pet the cats and chat with Miss Billie. Billie would get our names mixed-up and would always call Sandy "Linda." While Sandy was diligently scrubbing the base boards and mopping the floor, she'd hear Miss Billie on the phone saying, "Oh yes, Linda is over here visiting and cleaning my house." Poor Sandy! She did all the work and I got all the credit! It was a salutary lesson that our good deeds have to be to the glory of God! Fortunately, Sandy had the right attitude.

One last thing: when someone who is experiencing a painful situation comes to you, please, please, please, DO NOT say "I know how you feel." Erase that from your vocabulary! It doesn't help at all and is only turning the conversation back onto you. It's **not** about you. It's about this other person who is in pain. Even if you have experienced something very similar, your reaction may have been totally different. We need to remember that God has made us all unique. Someone who is in pain needs to be allowed to express her own emotions. There's a tendency to say that someone is "handling something well" if they don't actually articulate the pain they're experiencing but instead speak in elevated terms of it all being God's will. Of course, that is the bottom line. It **is** God's will. We know that. However, we need to allow someone to speak about the pain they feel without feeling that we're judging them for a lack of faith and trust in God. If you've been in this church for any time at all, of course you've been taught that nothing happens outside of God's control. However, some people have to walk very dark paths. They need to know that we understand the depths of their despair, hurt for them, and are earnestly praying for them. Later on, if they begin to indulge in self pity, then we can gently speak to them of God's sovereignty.

To summarize, we are commanded to love and serve one another. If we have no desire to do that, then we should be concerned. However, we need to examine our own situations and assess exactly what we are capable of doing. We must not and should not compare ourselves to each other - whether favorably or unfavorably. We also must remember that we are supposed to crucify our **own** flesh - **not** our loved ones'!

It's quite easy to run off and minister to someone else, leaving our husband, children, or other family members to fend for themselves. I remember years ago, a lady speaking about her mother. Her mother wasn't a Christian but loved to minister to others. She was very well respected and renowned in her small town for being the one to bring meals when someone had just had a baby, or was sick, or had experienced the loss of a loved one. However, while she was taking delicious meals to others, do you know what her husband and children were eating? Sandwiches! We have to have balance. God has given each of us our own set of responsibilities. They have to take priority.

As I said, I don't have the answers. There are some things we can definitely do and should do them without excusing ourselves. There are other things that we may be able to do. I think God puts certain people on our hearts. If we're honest with ourselves, we know who they are. God will arrange our circumstances to enable us to minister to them.

What an honor and privilege that a Holy God would speak to our hearts and use us for His glory! In Him be all glory and honor forever and ever, amen!