

The Gift of Exhortation

A gifted story: Val has a special sensitivity for people in trouble or facing a crisis in their lives. She recognizes that when bad things happen, our belief system can be violated and our faith shaken. These are the times that she is drawn to the side of the suffering person. Her compassionate nature and grasp of the human condition equip her to listen to those experiencing a crisis of faith, and she is able to relate God's presence in the midst of it all. Val's friendship, counsel and guidance renews and strengthens the faith of the afflicted people as they begin to see that the loving hand of God still at work in their lives. Val's gift of exhortation is a precious gift to the congregation.

Biblical references:

Romans 12:8 - ...if it (our gift) is to encourage others, we should do so.

Acts 4:36 - And so it was that Joseph, a Levite born in Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "One who encourages"), sold a field he owned, brought the money, and turned it over to the apostles.

1 Thess. 2:11-12 - You know that we treated each one of you just as a father treats his own children. We encouraged you, we comforted you, and we kept urging you to live the kind of life that pleases God... 1 Peter 5:1 - (I appeal to you) to be shepherds of the flock that God gave you and to take care of it willingly, as God wants you to, and not unwillingly.

Definition and comment:

The gift of Exhortation: the special gift whereby the Spirit enables certain Christians to stand beside fellow believers in need and bring comfort, counsel and encouragement so they feel helped. It is an ability to minister strengthening words of consolation to other members of the Body in such a way that they feel helped and healed. The gifted believer is able to reach out with Christian love and presence to people in personal conflict or facing a spiritual void. By virtue of this gift these people are motivated through encouraging words to live fruitful lives. The word "exhortation" today often carries a connotation of harshness, and that is actually incorrect. The Greek word "parakalon" in Romans 12:8 is literally translated "encouragement" - it refers to the often gentle actions of one who "comes alongside" to offer comfort, counsel and encouragement. The insights delivered with this gift enable the believer to find ways to bring out the best in others. It suggests reassurance, buttressing, consolation and support. Although it does not exclude the possibility of rebuke, the emphasis is on the positive. Many think of it as the "counseling gift." A number of apostles exercised this gift. Paul "exhorted them (the disciples) to continue in the faith" (Acts 14:21-22). Peter was commissioned by Jesus to "strengthen" his brothers (Luke 22:32) and he did so, encouraging the elders of the churches in their work. (1 Peter 5:1-2) This gift is especially helpful for those wishing to help others who are weak, drifting, or undergoing trials and difficulties in their lives.

Affirm that you have this gift; questions to ask yourself:

1. Are you sensitive to suffering, troubled and discouraged people and desire to help them?
2. Are you accepting of people deeply troubled or in crisis?
3. Have you been (or do you think you could be) used to encourage people to live more Christian lives?
4. Have you urged others to seek a biblical solution to their problems or afflictions?
5. Can you see yourself in a counseling or mentoring ministry?

Areas for study and personal growth:

1. In the Bible Paul often urges the disciples to "stir up" or "encourage" one another to love and good works. Meditate on ways to discover where this is needed and what might be done to fulfill this mission as Paul describes it.
2. Examine your personal demeanor when trying to offer encouragement. Patience, kindness, good listening skills, ability to build rapport - these are all essential to effective counseling. Where are your strengths and weaknesses with respect to these qualities? Work to build up areas where weaknesses are evident.
3. Good counselors know how to work closely with a person while fostering that person's sense of independence. Interdependence (ability to work well with others) comes later. Learn more about what goes into healthy

relationships from a human psychological point of view. Strive to understand stress reactions as well as coping mechanisms in order to enhance your sensitivities to people in need and your usefulness as a counselor.

4. Consider attending a workshop on good listening practices. Verbalization is only the starting point. Learn how to interpret body language, how to respond to draw out the deeper message and where to probe to get to the core of a person's pain.

5. Learn what programs are available for people who are troubled in various ways (addiction intervention, substance abuse, marital conflict resolution, and the disenfranchised).

General ways to use the gift of exhortation:

- Personally: counsel a friend with a problem, console a bereaved person, encourage a new Christian.
- Within the church: visit inactive or lapsed members, lead a marriage enrichment group, be a youth sponsor (see more specific church service opportunities in the Booklet Channels for Using the Gifts).
- Within the wider community: be a telephone hotline counselor, become involved in an addiction intervention program.

For reflection:

The Apostle Paul tells all Christians to be encouraging to one another and build one another up (1 Thess 5:11), so this is clearly a role for all of us to play - it is expected of all of us. We are asked to draw upon our natural abilities and do the best we can to encourage others. But then there are those who are especially empowered with a supernatural gift to do this at a highly effective level. That we must all do this illustrates the importance of the activity. Those with the gift of exhortation have to recognize, therefore, that their unique responsibility is to exhort or encourage especially well, with the greatest of effectiveness and the greatest of sensitivities. Training to develop expertise should be a real consideration.

Dag Hammarskjöld, past Secretary-General of the United Nations, observed, "It is more noble to give yourself completely to one individual than to labor diligently for the salvation of the masses." Those with the gift of exhortation know exactly what this means. They work with the individual on an extensive basis. It often takes a great investment of time to counsel well - it is not something done on a "quick fix" basis, but slowly, carefully, patiently, lovingly, hand-in-hand, for as long as it takes. After all, it takes time for healing.

Many would call people who exercise this gift to be "angles" on earth because the help they give is so precious to the receiver. There are many angelic parallels. God's love is very real, whether sent in the form of an angel or in the form of encouragement at the hand of a gifted believer.

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