

Kindness – Encouragement -- Challenge

Basic to life is the desire to love and to be loved. Love comes to us through kindness, encouragement, and helpful challenge.

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God—for God is love. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love has been brought to full expression through us. (1 John 4)

Kindness. Someone has wisely said that "people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care." To build a relationship on any other foundation is to build on sand. I have to know that you really want my happiness and growth, that you really are "for me", or I won't be able to open at all to your influence. I must understand that I am a person to you, not just a thing. I must know that I am not simply a "problem" to be solved. I must know you see me as a uniquely valuable person.

We know what real love is because Christ gave up his life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters. Dear children, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions. (1 John 3)

Encouragement. Love offers a person a sense of belonging and a sense of independence and freedom. What people really need is belief in themselves, confidence in their own ability to take on the problems and opportunities of life guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. To encourage means to put courage in. It instills a new and fuller awareness of his/her strength, lived in relationship with Jesus Christ. As average people we are tempted to live off the satisfaction that comes from living co-dependently with others. On one hand we love being needed so allow others to "use us". We try to rescue them before they are really ready to face reality about themselves or the consequences of their choices. On other occasions we look to others to provide the same for us. We look to be rescued and fixed instead of taking on our God-given

responsibility to find our strength and stability in relationship with God. When we do this we train one another to be addicts in need of a "people fix." It is not at all loving.

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

Challenge. After conveying kindness and implanting courage, true love should then invite the friend to stretch and grow, to attempt what was always considered too difficult, to break a self-destructive habit that has always been too overpowering, to rise above a fear, to give up a grudge, to open a repressed feeling, to confront a difficult situation, to offer a painful apology. If encouragement makes the loved one aware of his or her strength, challenge is the loving push to actually use this strength. "Try. Stretch. Do it. If you succeed, I will be in the front row clapping my hands off. If you fail, I will be sitting right at your side. You won't be alone. Go ahead now. Give it your best shot. You can do it!"

(Adapted from *Unconditional Love*, John Powell, Thomas More Publisher, Allen Texas, ©1978)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What kind of love has Jesus shown me again and again?
2. Which kinds of love are most difficult for me to give or receive?
3. Which kinds of love am I growing in my ability to give or receive?
4. How does the way I long for love from others differ from the way I offer love to others?
5. How do I need to grow in love as I relate to the needs of others?
6. Who needs kindness, encouragement, or challenge from me today?
Who do I need to forgive so I can reach out in love?