

Encouragement At Church

Acts 4:32-5:11

March 14, 1999

Pastor Peter Hiatt

Acts 4:31-37 “After they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God boldly.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had with great power. The Apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

There were no needy persons among them, for from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the Apostle’s feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the Apostles called Barnabas (which means, Son of Encouragement) sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the Apostle’s feet.”

BARNABAS, WHICH MEANS SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT! If you’ve studied the Bible much, you know that Barnabas shows up all over the place. He’s kind of behind the scenes, never really in the limelight, encouraging people. And here in Acts Chapter 4, he sells a big chunk of land, takes the proceeds, and lays it at the Apostle’s feet. Now, if someone here were to do that, like Barnabas did, would that encourage you?

I remember years ago at Belaire Presbyterian Church sitting in a car with a guy that used to encourage me quite a bit. He was telling me about Tim who was the former Youth Pastor. Tim was an acquaintance, really a friend of mine. He had been the Youth Pastor there before me--after Gary was there. And he said, “*Yeah, I’ll tell you, man, when Tim used to speak, gosh, he just had a silver tongue.*”

And I’ve always remembered that, like a wound. I mean it encouraged me to work like crazy to measure up. It encouraged *me*, that is my *self*, my *ego*--it encouraged me with fear! Courage through fear! *And so, in effect, it discouraged me in my spirit.*

Like in weight class in high school. Guys, you may remember this. The coach would say something like, “*Okay, you guys, I want you to encourage each other.*” And what that meant is you would lie on the bench press trying to lift this awful weight while everyone stood around you yelling, “*Come on you big woosy! Come on, you can do it! Come on!*”

Encouragement! Kind of like in college in Bible Study when the leader would say, “*You know what’s important? That you guys get together and encourage each other. You exhort each other to love and good works.*”

And so we would get together and share success stories like this: *“This week I prayed for an hour every day. This week I memorized the Book of Galatians.”*

The idea was to encourage each other, and that’s what we said. But, in effect we were saying, *“Come on you woosy! You can do it! Come on, measure up!”*

Encouragement!

Barnabas was the Son of Encouragement. Does that mean he was kind of behind the scenes whenever they were doing good work going, *“Come on, you big woosy, come on!”* Encourage is a hard word to translate into English. Sometimes it’s translated out of the Greek as: *Exhort; that is to motivate, to give warning, to urge strongly, convict.* But it’s also sometimes translated: *Comfort; that is to give peace or consolation.*

But consolation is comfort for losers, right? When you give someone a consolation prize you’re saying, *“Sorry, you lost, here’s a prize.”* How can a word mean motivate and console at the same time? How can a word mean convict and comfort all at the same time? The word in Greek is *Paraklesis*, Barnabas is the Son of *Paraklesis*, encouragement. *Parakletos* is Encourager.

Jesus said He was a *Parakletos*, and that He was sending another *Parakletos* to convict the world concerning sin and judgement. Somehow this *Parakletos* will comfort us by convicting us of the fact we’re losers! Encouragement!

How do we encourage, motivate? People say it’s good to have goals to shoot for, and Tim was like my goal. He worked at Belaire a little bit before me. He was married and had children a little bit before me. He was a senior pastor in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church a little bit before me. And so I’d calculate: *How big is Tim’s church? Where is he at? How’s he doing?*

And if I felt like I measured up to Tim, then I took courage in that. And when someone said to me, *“You know, Peter, you speak as good as Tim,”* I said, *“Oh no, no.”*

But I just sucked it up!

Like a drug!

And then I immediately needed more!

Like a drug.

Compliments can be like that. People will encourage me after a sermon, and say, *“Oh that was great.”* And I act humble, but I just suck it up! And yet, no sooner have I experienced the rush of that compliment than I’m filled with fear, *“Oh, my gosh, what am I going to next week? And do they know I’m really kind of a moron?”*

Christians will say, *“Oh, we know it wasn’t you, it was the Holy Spirit.”* Do they really believe that, and do I really believe that? Do I want to believe that because then how would it encourage me? And let’s say the Holy Spirit didn’t show up for a month, would I still get my paycheck? Encouragement!

I last saw Tim four years ago at the General Assembly of our denomination, and it was great to see him. He was always fun and kind.

I remember checking the denominational records, because they print attendance. And I remember taking courage in the fact that our church was catching up with his church.

One night at the General Assembly they especially honored Tim for his work in the pastorate and for overcoming an injury in which he had lost his foot. They called him down front to the podium. I remember Tim walking down and everyone stood up spontaneously and applauded. He stood in front of the entire General Assembly, and he spoke the most eloquent words. Silver tongued!

I remember thinking, *“Wow.”*

He was going on vacation right after that, and I was thinking, *“Such a gift, such words! He’s king of the world!”*

And it motivated me.

Recently my friend Johnny Patterson told me, *“You know, Peter, I had an interesting conversation with Tim that night. Right after he got down off that platform, after everyone applauded, and he spoke those eloquent words, he took me aside and confided in me. He said, ‘Johnny, I’ve never felt more weak in all my life. I’ve never felt more discouraged.’”* So encouraged and yet utterly discouraged!

Anyway, Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement, sold his land, and it motivated other folks to do likewise. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property, and with his wife’s full knowledge, he kept part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the Apostle’s feet.

Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept part of the proceeds that you received for yourself? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.”

Somehow, Ananias had lied to God--to the Spirit of God within his church. When Ananias heard this, he fell down dead! He died!

“And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. And then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, carried him out, and buried him. About three hours later his wife came in not knowing what had happened. Her husband was just buried and she didn’t even know it. This is a pretty amazing story! And Peter asked her, ‘Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land? Is it?’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that’s the price.’

Peter said to her, ‘How could you? How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of the men who buried your husband are at the

door, and they're going to carry you out also.' At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. And the young men came in and found her dead and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."

And so wanting to look like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira sell property. They *act* like they're giving all of it to the church, but they *don't*. In effect, they act like they're giving themselves, but in reality, what they're doing is keeping themselves.

Now, if I was Peter, and a gift like that was offered to the church (we're talking about a lot of money it sounds like)--and if I knew they had kept a little bit back for themselves, you know what? I would have taken it. Even if they did tell a white lie to save face, I probably would have voted for the Ananias and Sapphira Fellowship Hall in the new building! Big deal!

What's going on? A guy is shacking up with his mother-in-law in Corinth, does the Spirit kill him? No! It's implicit that it's the Spirit doing this. Pilate, Annas, Caiphas, the Roman guard that pounded spikes through the hands and feet of the Messiah, does the Spirit kill them? No! A guy named Saul, who turns out to be Paul, dragging Christians off to their death, does the Spirit kill him?

Peter has just rebuked Ananias and Sapphira, but a few weeks earlier had renounced Jesus, denied Jesus three times and ran in terror into the night when Jesus needed him the most, does the Spirit kill him? And yet Ananias and Sapphira, they just tell a little fib to save face, and blammo! They're dead!

We don't know exactly what was going on inside of Ananias and Sapphira. And we don't know whether they went to heaven or to hell, but one thing is exceedingly clear, isn't it?

God does not like it when people play church!

Act the part in church!

Pretend to be spiritual in the power of the flesh.

Last week we noticed that really what Ananias and Sapphira did was to fake a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. That really bugs us when people fake manifestations of the Holy Spirit. We expose them on 20/20 when they fake those sign gifts, those miracles, those healings, and stuff like—that!

We pointed out that gifts like generosity, administration, preaching, those also come from the Spirit, right? Fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control. We never get mad at people for faking those things. *"Oh, I feel the love of the Lord."*

"You do not!"

"Pow! You're dead!" You never see that!

Why is that? Maybe it's because we believe somehow that Jesus really doesn't get credit for those things. So maybe we expect people to fake those things. And maybe in a way we really do play church.

We act the part.

I recently read about a family who invited another family over for dinner. It might have been after church, I don't know. They're sitting around the table in the dining room. They're about to eat, and the mother turns to her six-year-old daughter and says, "*Honey, would you say the blessing today?*"

And the six-year-old looked up at her mother and said, "*Mommy, I wouldn't know what to say.*"

"Honey, just say what you hear mommy say."

The little girl looked at her mom, folded her arms and said, "*Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people over for dinner?*"

Oops!

Children are bad actors!

That's why we coach our children before we come to church.

Bad Actors!

And Jesus said, "*I want you to become like children.*"

Because we're good actors. I think part of it is because of this: *We believe we were saved by grace working through the Holy Spirit when we were wretches.*

But I don't think we believe we're sanctified by that same Spirit while we're wretches.

In other words, we believe this: *We're saved by grace, but once you get saved, once you're at church, we better encourage you to get your act together! And then that's what church becomes. An act! A play! A club! With merit badges and accolades and honors and awards and come Sunday morning you show up in your best clothes with your best behavior.*

Kind of like when you go to the hospital, you show up acting all healthy, right?

Because that's what a hospital is all about—health!

So we show up at church acting all selfless, while we think about ourselves.

We give, but we don't really give...

because we give in order to get—"*What am I going to get out of this?*"

Feel good about myself or something?

We act all spiritual in the energy of the flesh—act the part.

Playing church!

I was on a local Christian TV station a couple of years ago. This perky interviewer guy was interviewing me on the very nice couch by the nice picture of the boat. And I remember he turned to me and said, "*Brother Peter, tell me, when a young, vibrant*

couple walks into that wonderful church of yours and you look at them. What do you think?"

I froze! Because inside I heard an answer.

And I don't know whether it was the Lord talking, or me, or just a really good memory.

But this was the answer: *"What do I think? She's a babe!"*

And I remember sitting there thinking, *"I can't say that! This is Christian TV, I'll get crucified!"*

So I remembered something Aram had said which I thought was really good.

So I said: *"Oh, I look at them, and I think, 'God has a plan for them'"*

I lied! Like Ananias and Sapphira.

And I bet I encouraged other folks to lie.

My friend Tim spoke with the most eloquent words at that General Assembly meeting. He came down from the podium and confided in my friend saying, *"Johnny, I've never felt more weak in all my life."*

And Johnny said, *"Tim, why don't you go to the elders?"*

And Johnny said this to me later, *"Peter, I remember Tim looked back at me with shock in his eyes, and he said, 'Go to the elders! I've seen what they do to weak people. They'd crucify me!'"*

Now, I'm an elder! Aram's an elder! Andrew's an elder, Glenn's an elder. We have a wonderful group of elders here, you've got to hear me on that, with whom I can share my weaknesses, but you understand what Tim meant, don't you?

"Johnny, I'm the senior pastor, I've got to keep up the act, preach on joy."

I'm an elder, you're an elder, Andrew, you're an elder, gotta keep up the act!

People are watching you!

Don't you want to be a good example?

You're a mother or a father, you're children are watching you!

You'd better get it together, keep up the act!

What kind of example do you want to be?

Bible study leader?

Play church, do your part!

Maintain the institution!

Validate the club!

Show your weaknesses?

YOU SHOW YOUR WEAKNESSES, YOU COULD GET CRUCIFIED--BY THE POWER STRUCTURE.

(And I know that, because I've seen it.)

Years ago, when I was a kid I watched my youth pastor, Gary Reddish, get crucified. He got fired for being real about Jesus. Gary has always been kind of insane, but I knew what it was, I watched him. I knew the players, they were jealous.

It was a power struggle, playing church. A couple of years later, I watched the same group get my dad fired. *That really hurt.* I watched him get crucified on the floor of the Presbytery. And I knew why, I knew the players. *He wouldn't play their games.* So when Johnny told me what Tim said, *"I've seen what they do, I've felt it."* I knew it. And I thought: *Well, they're not doing it to me!*

Like I told you, four years ago Tim left the General Assembly, and he went on vacation. Then he left vacation, by himself, early. He came home alone. He wrote a letter to his family--and another letter to his church. Then he went into the garage, rigged up a hose from the tailpipe to the inside of the car.

HE TURNED ON THE IGNITION, SAT THERE ALONE, AND DIED!

Tim was one of Gary's best friends. And I loved him, or I should say really that I liked him, because I was jealous of Tim.

Isn't that sick? Isn't that wretched! It's obscene, for it means that when Tim died leaving behind three children, a wife and a church, my flesh rejoiced.

I caught up!

That flesh, that self doesn't need encouragement.

That self needs crucifixion.

I don't know what all was going on inside of Tim. I can't know that, but I really hope he's really with Jesus because he said he really trusted Jesus for his salvation. But, at least for a time, Tim forgot to trust Jesus for his sanctification.

I mean his courage, his joy, his redemption, moment by moment, day by day in grace. For in his suicide letter to his church he wrote this: *"Out of the countless sins that I have committed in this life, it is my own wretched weakness of which I am most ashamed."*

Tim, I think, was very different from Ananias and Sapphira, and yet I can't help but wonder: *Did they die because they were ashamed of their own wretched weakness?*

Sapphira had an opportunity. Peter gave it to her. Ananias did too.

But they chose to hide their weakness, to hide their shame, to play church.

And it killed them.

"It is my own wretched weakness of which I am most ashamed." It reminds me of another verse in another letter, written by the Apostle Paul, where he said, *"I will all the more gladly boast in my weaknesses that the power of Christ might rest more fully upon me."*

You see, that's incredible.

And if that's really true, doesn't it mean: *Tim could have stood in front of the entire General Assembly that day and read his letter.*

And not died.

For, in a sense, reading that he would have died--to self.

But he wouldn't have died because Jesus died.

Maybe he would have gotten crucified for that, but God has this amazing way of dealing with crucified folks.

Perhaps he could have been resurrected.

Right then and there!

Perhaps an entire church, an entire room full of elders and pastors resurrected right then and there somehow.

Perhaps if I boast of weaknesses the power of Christ really will rest more fully upon me.

And perhaps I really do have a treasure in these earthen vessels, this clay pot to show that the transcendent power belongs to God.

Because if the messenger says, *"I'm weak."*, but the message still goes out with power and with grace like it did at Tim's church, what does that tell you?

The power isn't in the messenger, but in the message. The Word!

Maybe on that TV show I should have just been honest. I should have just turned to my brother on the couch and said, *"Well, this is what I think: Whoa, she's a babe!"*

That's kind of wrong isn't it?

That's kind of wrong of me to look at people like that.

You see, God is working with me!

What I'm trying to say, brother, is that, *"I'm Brother Moron. That's what I am, a moron."*

But you know what? God is working at our church, isn't that incredible!"

And in doing so maybe I would have encouraged other morons to confess their sins. And maybe when we are unfaithful and confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The power of sin is in hiding it!

Maybe he would really cleanse us of all unrighteousness, and then our lives would become a testimony to our Lord's grace.

And maybe instead of playing church, we'd be real church.

Instead of being intimidated by success stories, we'd be encouraged by weakness stories.

How do we encourage each other in church?

Isn't it with stories of our own weakness?

And His strength.

In other words, stories of grace.

They are not stories of grace if it's not your weakness and His strength.

You know why the story of Peter is so encouraging to me? I read about Peter—the things he did before, even after he was saved. Later in Acts, when he blows it, I look at Peter and I think, *"Whoa, the guy is a moron!"*

And look what You did through him, and You love him!

Boy, that really encourages me.

And look at Paul, dragging Christians off to their death! And he even writes in the present tense, *“O wretched man that I am, who’s going to deliver me from this body of death?”*

Lord, I can relate to that guy.

Look what You did through him, that’s encouraging.

And I can look at people like Barnabas and Thomas.

And in the Old Testament, talk about weirdos—Abraham, Moses, David.

Have you ever read their stories?

God, those guys are morons, losers, and look what You did through them.

Lord, I can relate to them.

That encourages me!

But the stories of Ananias, the spirit of Sapphira, the spirit of the Pharisees. Their stories are like this: *I gave a field, I prayed for an hour every day this week. I memorized the Book of Revelations on living by the Spirit. I did this, I did that. I do this, I do that. I do this church thing really well.*

All those stories are so discouraging.

Because they encourage me—my self, my pride, my ego.

And I don’t need any more of self.

For, in truth, Peter Hiatt is dead!

And deep, deep down, I think I suspect that.

Encouraging a dead thing is entirely discouraging.

But if I surrender that dead thing, confess and expose him daily, that wretched, prideful self, crucified...

God has a wonderful way of dealing with crucified folks.

And when I am joined together with Jesus, in a death like His, when He takes that death upon Himself, the Bible says I am also resurrected with Jesus in a resurrection like his, and he gets the credit.

And so now you see, Lookout Mountain Community Church, I want to encourage you in the Spirit of the *Parakletos*, by saying this: *“You’re all a bunch of wretches. You call yourself a Christian, what you’ve just said is, ‘I’m a loser.’ A moron, if you will. Wretches!”*

I hear some pastors say this: *“I don’t need to tell people they’re sinners, they already know that.”*

I say that’s wrong!

You don’t even begin to know how much of a sinner you really are.

That’s why we need a *Parakletos*, a convicter.

You don’t even begin to understand how wretched you are, and yet get this: *You are being saved and sanctified.*

That means you don't even begin to understand how amazing the grace and power of Jesus is.

That's where our courage comes from.

Not our self, but Him.

And so boast of your weaknesses, that the power of Christ might rest more fully upon you, the *Parakletos*, that is, the Spirit of conviction and comfort.

Do you see that really is encouraging?

To answer the question of last week: *How do we get filled?*

First, a part of it is we've got to get empty. And even that is the work of the Spirit, for Jesus said, *"I'll send the Parakletos, and He will convict the world of sin."*

The *Parakletos* comes and convicts us of sin, and comforts us with grace, and constrains us, motivates us with grateful love.

And He declares to us what belongs to Jesus. Jesus said He would do that. Do you know what belongs to Jesus? Everything! That's encouraging! But He gets the credit.

And so, Barnabas sold a field and gave it.

And many of the church were encouraged.

Because it's no longer Barnabas who lives, but Christ who lives in Barnabas.

Jesus gave it, and that's encouraging.

Last week, because my friend, in her letter, asked me to tell you about what had happened to me when I was filled with the Spirit in Toronto, I told you about that. I told you that it wasn't necessarily a thing totally foreign, but just amazing, because it happened with such intensity. That on the last day I was really filled in a remarkable way, but before this I believe I was also emptied by the same Spirit.

For all week I had stood there just going, *"God, do the Spirit thing."*

I want to be the best at it, striving for it, working at it, jealous of the things that He was doing in other people.

That afternoon, the last day I went to a conference and at the end two folks just prayed for me.

They weren't even official folks.

I don't even remember what they prayed.

But I do remember this: As they started to pray I heard words in my mind.

And for those of you who don't hear that kind of thing if ever, or never, or very often, let me tell you that's the only time in my life I think I've ever heard words like that, that clearly.

And the words were these: *"Peter, you don't love my bride very much, do you?"*

And when I heard that, it was like someone flipped a switch in my soul.

I just began to sob, and sob, and sob, and sob.

I began to see deep into those secret places of my heart, and I realized that, in reality, *I hated the church.*

In a deep kind of way.

I mean, I love people in the church, but this collective thing called church, I hated it! And that I had even gone into the ministry.

I was motivated in the ministry out of my hatred for the church.

I was going to beat the church at playing church, because I had felt so deeply how they beat my dad, beat my youth pastor, and in effect beat me.

But the Lord showed me, “*Hey, Peter, they also beat me, and I love them, I love you, my bride.*” But I saw that in some amazing way I hated the bride.

And all my good works were infected with hatred, and that in reality, I am the church playing church.

And I sobbed, and I sobbed, and I sobbed.

I’ve never been so convicted and yet at the same time so comforted.

So convicted!

And yet, I didn’t feel condemned.

In fact, I felt set free.

It was so weird, I was sobbing, but it was almost as if Somebody was sobbing through me,

that I was crying Somebody else’s tears,

that Somebody was feeling my weakness, my suffering, my pain,

that Jesus was crying His tears through me.

And washing me.

That night, as I told you, I would be utterly convinced that all along, He had been working—in me, and through me—a wretch.

I don’t know how long I lay there on the floor crying.

But when I opened my eyes everybody was gone.

The hotel staff had set up chairs around my body on the floor.

I stood up, and I remember walking out of the room and thinking to my myself, “*Maybe I just freaked. Maybe I just snapped.*”

Because, like I said, it wasn’t something totally unfamiliar, it was just such a strong dose.

I thought maybe I had snapped. But after that night, no, I knew and I know.

I’ve been touched in a powerful way by the *Parakletos*—Convicter, Comforter, Encourager.

And so, Lookout Mountain, may you be encouraged in this: You are more wretched than you know!

And that means the grace and power of Jesus is far, far more amazing than you know.

Oh, how He loves you, and the only way that you will ever believe that and see that is through the *Parakletos*.

So let's invite Him. *So Holy Spirit, we ask that you would continue to fall afresh on us, Lookout Mountain Community Church, that you would melt us, convict us, that you would mold us as you comfort us, that you would constrain us with love, Lord, so that our lives would be stories of grace and wonder, over and over again saying to people, "You know, really, I'm dead, I'm a moron, and look what God has done."*

Lord, I have to confess, I think we have to confess together that we have believed a lie, maybe not within our theology, but deep within our hearts, Lord, we've believed a lie that on Judgement Day we will have to stand before your throne and be our own defense attorney.

Lord, Your Spirit is also called the Advocate, the Defense Attorney. For, Lord Jesus, Spirit of Jesus, You take what is the Lord's and You declare it to us. Help us to believe that, so that, Lord God, we would gladly tell stories of grace. And that boasting of our weaknesses, the power of Christ would be all over us. Wow! Thank You.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

Benediction: May you encourage each other, and by that I mean encourage the work of Jesus in you.

Not the self.

Say to the person next to you, *"You know, you really are a wretch, but how amazing is God's grace. I see it all over you. He's working in you. He's changing you. He's shaping you."*

Because let me tell you, I appreciate your words of encouragement after a sermon, as long as you believe this in faith: *You're a moron!*

I suck the other stuff up like a drug, but it comes back on me and kills me.

But compliments that focus on what Jesus is doing are shocking to me.

Someone said this a few Sunday's ago.

Not that it always has to be like this, but when you see the fruit of love, joy and peace all that stuff, that's the Lord working, and you can encourage that in people, God's doing that.

But this person came up to me and said, *"One time you were preaching and the weirdest thing happened. I saw this glow around you, and I was new in the Lord. I didn't know what it was at the time. But now I know, that was the Holy Spirit."*

And I was entirely encouraged.

I said something like this, *"Well, I sure hope it wasn't me! I can't do that. I'm usually thinking about going home, having a beer, watching the football game or something. I mean, I'm a moron."*

BUT, WOW, GOD WORKS THROUGH MORONS!

Disclaimer: This document is a draft and has not been edited by the author. Therefore, there may be discrepancies. Some discrepancies may be minor; some may have to do with theology. When in doubt, please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website and don't be shy about informing us of errors.