



# THE EXHORTER

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***“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40***

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**1 Thessalonians 5:14** *“We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.”*

As the apostle Paul concludes his first letter to the young church at Thessalonica, he gives them a list of practical and helpful things to keep them going. Notice a couple of things from this verse.

First, notice the action words that Paul wanted the brethren to engage in. He lists, admonish, encourage, help and be patient. The chapter before ends with words that would help those who were mourning the death of the righteous. There, Paul tells them, comfort one another with these words.

These action words reveal to us that we all do not need the same thing. Some need encouraging. Others need admonishing. Others need just a little more time, patience. Still others need comfort. This tells us that we are not all going through the same things at the same time. Some of us are struggling, others are mourning, and still others, need a kick in the pants. The challenge of shepherds in the church is to recognize who is where. How disastrous it would be to admonish someone who only needed some comfort or encouraging. This is sometimes done. The results are not pretty. The wounded Christian feels crushed and abandoned by his own people. Instead of support, he received fingers pointing at him and rebuke. He cannot understand why they don't understand. This reminds us that one size fits all leadership rarely works.

There is also the challenge for the preacher in these action words. Some sermons need to teach. Some sermons need to admonish. Some sermons need to be encouraging. Sermons cannot be the same all the time and the reason is, a segment of the congregation would not be helped if that were the case. Encouraging sermons are the easiest to preach. But that is not always the most needed item at the moment. Preachers must understand that. To always admonish in your sermons makes the congregation feel that they can never do anything right. The preacher is never happy. He makes them believe that God is never happy. More, more, more, like the demanding high school coach, the congregation feels pushed and exhausted. Paul's list includes patience and encouragement.

The second thing that we notice in this list is that the brethren were in different conditions spiritually. Look at the words again. Paul says that some are unruly, some are fainthearted, some are weak. The list isn't pretty: Weak Christians, fainthearted Christians, unruly Christians. Implied in this list is that some are strong. If there wasn't any strong ones, then who would do the admonishing, encouraging and helping?

(OVER)

Unruly has to do with obedience. Some are rebels. They will push the envelope every time. They need a string tied to their ankles because they are always go off somewhere where they don't belong. The unruly need a good dose of Biblical authority. They need to understand that God rules. They must learn the pattern of the New Testament. Rebels become radicals which quickly become apostates if they are not taught. Admonish them. This doesn't have to be mean, ugly or in your face. But there are out of bounds lines that they need to recognize. They must learn what God is like and what He wants. The wild at heart can be tamed under Christ. One of the virtues Peter wanted Christians to add to their faith is self-control. Pull your feelings, emotions and thoughts in. Line them up under Christ. Deny self, follow Christ. The unruly can be a challenge, but they can be taught. Admonish them.

The fainthearted reminds me of the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz. All the things he would do if he only had the nerve. And that's the problem, there is no nerve. Afraid and fearful are the components of the fainthearted. Some faint at the sight of blood. Some faint at the first sign of trouble. Maybe not literally faint, but definitely not sure what to do or where to go. Fear is fed by weak faith. Fear leads to doubting. Eventually, the doubter drops out. Now, from the outside, it's easy to see the unruly and the fainthearted as the same. Both quit. However, they quit for different reasons. Being scared and being a rebel are not the same. Paul's words to those who are afraid is to encourage them. They need to understand that God is with them, even through the valley of the shadow of death. They need to remember that God is always on the throne. They need to know that tough times are not a time to go and hide, but to walk with the Lord. Encouragement is what they need. Build them up. Put some oxygen back into their souls.

The weak are yet different from the unruly and the fainthearted. Weak in faith is what is intended. Weak backs, weak minds and weak faith doesn't do anyone much good. In the parable of the sower, the shallow rooted seedling soon withered away because of the blazing sun. There was no depth to it. The roots couldn't reach down to the moisture that it needed. It dried up and died. The same happens to the Christian today. Weak faith is illustrated by poor attendance. Weak faith doesn't think spiritually very often. Wrong choices, wrong friends, wrong results are what happens when one has weak faith. Again, the unruly and the weak may seem the same from the outside, but they are so different. Not understanding that will result in doing the wrong thing. The weak needs to be strong. There is one common way that happens, drink deeply into the word of God. Study. Classes. Sermons. Reading. Asking questions. Grow that faith. Use that faith. Turn the light on for the Lord. Help the weak. Be there. Support them. Show them. Guide them.

Patience with everyone. This includes the lists above and it also includes those not on the list. The unruly, the fainthearted, the weak all need time to grow, change and become. Impatience will be the death of any group. The strong has to be patient. Sometimes they are not. Sometimes they get weary of having to help so many others. When we are not patient, we say things that we shouldn't. We get irritated with one another. We get testy and it strains relationships.

The congregation Paul was writing to, the congregation that you are a member of, is made up of a mixture of people with all kinds of backgrounds, baggage and often, issues. We want a perfect church. You will not find it. Everyone congregation has problems. Every congregation has bright moments and dark secrets that it is ashamed of. Every congregation needs the Lord.

Paul's words were not to drive off the unruly, the fearful, and the weak. They needed them. They could change. They could improve. Too many would rather have problem members leave. But the problem is, who is the problem member, or better yet, who is not a problem member. All of us are on this journey with Christ. We may not be unruly or fearful, but we still need help. We still need encouraging. We still need to be taught. We still need one another and we especially, still need the Lord.

Too many congregations bump and bruise and shoot their own wounded. That's not only a shame, but it's a violation of our passage today. This is not what Paul said. Help. Encourage. Admonish. Be patient. I expect more members drop off and drop out because of their feelings toward one another than what is taught. It's hard to be a part when you are not accepted as a part. It's hard to feel loved when you are not loved.

Each of us can do so much to help each other. Love, support, defend, teach and encourage are things that most of us can do. If we pointed the finger less at each other, if we gossiped less and encouraged more, the attitude and the atmosphere of most places would change. I met a young man from St. Louis a while back. His name was Ian. He had been bullied by friends and school most of his life. He hung around me a lot the week I was with that church. One evening he told me, "I just love this place. The people are the best. They accept me as I am." I think young Ian was on to something there. I think that church was on to something. Instead of pointing out our differences, let's highlight what we have in common. The top of the list is Jesus. From that, we build incredible relationships that make a difference spiritually.

We need each other. That was Paul's point!

Roger Shouse