

SESSION 4

We Encourage One Another

GETTING STARTED

DISCUSS: When have you benefited from a little encouragement?

RECAP (PAGE 87): In 1895, sixteen-year old Edward Steichen bought a camera with money his mother gave him and started snapping pictures around the house—fifty of them, in fact. When the film was developed, he had forty-nine bad pictures and only one good one: a picture of his sister at the piano. His father thought that was a poor showing, but his mother insisted that one photo was beautiful and more than compensated for forty-nine failures. Her encouragement convinced the boy to stick with his new hobby.

Edward pressed on to become one of the world’s most renowned photographers. But, in the beginning, he almost gave up. What pushed him forward were his mother’s encouraging words in the midst of a lot of failure.¹³

The Christian life can be hard at times. Temptations abound, and we sometimes struggle to honor God in our lives. Encouragement from fellow believers is a great help in this struggle. Their words of support push us forward when we might be tempted to give in or give up. We need the encouragement of other believers—and they need ours.

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Point** on page 88. Invite group members to fill in the blanks.

THE POINT: We need the ENCOURAGEMENT of others—and they need ours.

STUDY THE BIBLE

GIVE BIBLICAL CONTEXT: Paul was an expert in encouragement. When Paul (Saul) became a Christian, some of the other Christians seemed slow to welcome him. But Barnabas, a nickname meaning “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4:36), reached out to Paul and introduced him to the Jerusalem church (9:26-27). Paul often stressed Christians’ need to encourage one another. For example, “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

RECAP (PAGE 88): Becoming a Christian isn’t about improving yourself or becoming more spiritual. It’s a radical transformation. It’s about receiving a new identity—one that produces new longings, godly dispositions, and fruitful behaviors. The Christian life is marked by contrasts; it’s a life that distinguishes between “what I used to be” and “what I am today.” As the apostle Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Through our new identity, God produces a new way of living.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Ephesians 4:17-22 on page 88.

GUIDE: Direct your group's attention to the following heading on page 88: **PUT AWAY sinful habits.**

RECAP (PAGE 88): Because of our new lives in Christ, we must resist returning to sinful attitudes or actions. Toward that end, Paul told us "to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires" (v. 22). As people living a new life through Jesus, we must put away those attitudes and actions that conflict with God's holiness. In verse 22, Paul told us what to do—discard the old way of life.

DISCUSS: What changed the most when you became a follower of Jesus? *[ALTERNATE: How can we encourage one another to "take off" sin?]*

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Ephesians 4:23-28 on page 88.

GUIDE: Direct your group's attention to the following heading on page 89: **Encourage others to live CONSISTENT with their new lives in Christ.**

RECAP (PAGE 89): In the Christian life, we've seen what we're supposed to "take off" (our old sinful habits). Now, let's consider what we're to "put on." We're "to put on the new self" (v. 24). In saying this, Paul painted a stark contrast between the old self and the new self.

- ▶ "The old self" (v. 22) was "excluded from the life of God" (v. 18), while "the new self" was "created according to God's likeness" (v. 24). The old self was characterized by darkness, ignorance, and impurity (vv. 18-19) while the new self is characterized by "righteousness and purity of the truth" (v. 24).
- ▶ Jesus saves us in order to change us. This doesn't mean we'll always be perfect, but it does mean that we shouldn't intentionally return to our "former way of life" (v. 22) or knowingly make room for old besetting sins. Instead, we're to persistently pursue attitudes and actions consistent with new life in Christ.

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Bring one or two items of clothing that might make someone behave differently if they were wearing them. For example, put on a cowboy hat and you may find yourself speaking with a Texas drawl. Or a leather motorcycle jacket might make you feel more like a rebel. After giving these examples, encourage group members to think of other examples of putting on something that changes your attitude or outlook. Use this to help discuss what Paul meant by taking off former ways and putting on the new self.

DISCUSS: Who has inspired you to live consistently with your new life in Christ? *[ALTERNATE: How can we encourage each other to live consistently with Christ's teaching?]*

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Ephesians 4:29-32 on page 89.

GUIDE: Direct your group's attention to the following heading on page 89: **Take every opportunity to ENCOURAGE others with your words.**

RECAP (PAGE 89): Paul exhorted us to watch our mouths. How would our conversations differ if we resolved to allow no room for language that was coarse, foul, or worthless? How might our relationships thrive if, when talking to others, each of us consciously thought about using our words to build up others rather than spewing speech that tears them down? God expects His children to build up one another.

DO: Divide group members into subgroups of three or four people each. Invite subgroups to complete the activity **He Makes All Things New** on page 89 together.

He Makes All Things New: Use the space below to record specific words that describe your “old self” (your character before encountering Jesus) and your “new self” (your character after encountering Jesus).

Old Self

New Self

LEADER PACK: Display **Pack Item #11**, the “**New Life in Christ**” poster. Invite group members to record their responses from the activity **He Makes All Things New** onto the poster. Use this visual to facilitate a group discussion on everyone’s responses.

DISCUSS: How do we apply these verses to our interactions on social media? [*ALTERNATE: How have your thoughts and attitudes changed since you became a Christ-follower?*]

DISCUSS: What role can our group play in encouraging one another as these verses describe?



LIVE IT OUT

SAY: “How will you use your words to encourage others in the body of Christ? Consider the following applications.”

GUIDE: Direct group members to review the three bulleted statements under **Live It Out** on page 90. Call on volunteers to share (1) which of these statements is something they want to pursue further, or (2) ways this study will transform their prayer lives this week.

- ▶ **Talk to God.** Through prayer, ask God to bring to light any words, phrases, or patterns of speech that you need to “put away.” Ask God for the grace needed to speak words of life and encouragement instead.
- ▶ **Talk to yourself.** One of the best ways to “talk to yourself” is by speaking the Word of God to yourself. In that light, consider memorizing Ephesians 4:29: “No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.”

► **Talk to others.** Identify three people who might be encouraged by your words. Write cards, craft emails, send texts, or meet with each of them face-to-face to encourage them in their walk with Jesus.

GUIDE: Invite each person to gather with two or three Christ-followers of the same gender this week for a deeper discussion, using **Talk It Out** (page 90) to guide their discussion. Encourage group members to spend time each day in God’s Word with the devotions found in the **Daily Study** section (pages 91–94).

PRAY: Close your Bible study time with prayer.

DIG DEEPER

Use the commentary below as you prepare to lead the session.

[VERSE 17]: Paul insisted his readers put away sinful habits, emphasizing the radical change readers had experienced when they became Christians. First, believers “should no longer live as the Gentiles.” The church at Ephesus had some Gentile members. Paul was referring to pagan, immoral behavior of the Gentiles more than ethnicity.

[VERSES 18-19]: Before becoming Christians, Gentiles experienced spiritual darkness. They were “excluded from the life of God.” In their sinful state, the Gentiles were ignorant of God and the salvation He offered. Paul also pointed to the “hardness of their hearts.” Hardness of heart is a word picture for a steady resistance to the revelation of God. One result of this spiritual and moral insensitivity was a promiscuous lifestyle of impurity. He also noted the pagans were marked by “a desire for more and more”—it could be rendered “greedy.”

[VERSES 20-22]: Gentiles in the Ephesian church became Christians when they “came to know Christ.” Paul’s readers had been “taught by him,” apparently referring to Jesus. Paul likely meant they had learned the truth about Christ and now knew how to live for Him. As pagans encountered the good news about Jesus, they would “take off your former way of life.” The “old self” designated the unsaved person enslaved to sin.

[VERSES 23-24]: The total person is transformed by salvation. Paul mentioned “minds,” but he didn’t mean salvation is limited to our intellect. Since Christians take off the “old self,” they need to “put on the new self.” The phrase “new self” refers to the transformation experienced in salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). The new person has been created “according to God’s likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.”

[VERSES 25-28]: Paul offered several examples of practical expressions of Christian behavior. He began with truth-telling, quoting Zechariah 8:16. Paul knew any kind of deception or lying harms the Christian community. Because “we are members of one another,” we should be truthful. Regarding anger, Paul quoted Psalm 4:4. He warned about

the danger of inappropriate anger. No matter what prompts anger, we should be careful. Paul said “do not sin” in our anger. Angry outbursts “give the devil an opportunity.” Our anger, justified or not, might become a foothold or opportunity for the devil to work in our lives. Like anger, stealing can disrupt any human society, including a church. Paul declared the thief should “do honest work with his own hands.” Able-bodied people should work in order to be able to share with needy people.

[VERSE 29]: Christians should encourage others with their speech; they shouldn’t use foul language. Rather than degrading language, we should say “what is good for building up someone in need.”

[VERSE 30]: Paul added that our behavior might “grieve God’s Holy Spirit.” Sometimes we think of the Holy Spirit more as an impersonal force or power than a personal reality. He spoke of the key role of the Spirit in our salvation. The Spirit seals us “for the day of redemption.” Since Paul mentioned grieving the Spirit at this point, our improper speech must be one thing that disappoints God.

[VERSE 31]: Paul mentioned several forms of inappropriate speech. Although Paul dealt primarily with the spoken word, our application would include all kinds of communication. Any kind of sinful speech or other communication can harm others and impact our Christian witness. Bitterness, anger, and wrath are the natural result of a lack of control of anger (Ephesians 4:26). We should also avoid “shouting and slander” and malice (speech motivated primarily by self-centeredness or other bad motives).

[VERSE 32]: Paul turned to expected behavior. “One another” appears twice (from two different Greek terms) in this verse. Christians always need to recall that they are part of a community of faith. Their behavior, good or bad, impacts other people. We should be kind and compassionate. Our behavior should reflect genuine concern for the needs of others. Paul concluded this discussion by reminding readers that they should forgive others, since “God also forgave you in Christ.”



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