

Together We Thrive - Growing in Confidence

By Mindi Kirklin, Cincinnati, OH, USA

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 3:12. *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*

Matthew 7:24–27. *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”*

I haven't felt boldly confident over the past few years. I have wrestled through so many insecurities, so much doubt in myself as a leader, as a parent, well, pretty much in every area of my life. I have felt attacked by Satan and have grieved the attacks all around me as the enemy seems bent on destruction of everything that is good.....every person who trusts in the Lord, every family that has been built on Christ. The attacks have been personal, targeted and effective.

When Jesus said that the storms came to both houses, the one built on the rock and the one built on the sand, he meant it. The storms have come and have tested our foundations. I know few people who have escaped without some sort of testing. The Bible tells us that this is true, and yet, every time the testing comes my way, I am in complete shock! Like what is happening??

Despite the clarity of 1 Peter 4:12, It rocks me EVERY SINGLE TIME! Ugh! I want so badly to be that female hero in the action movie that looks across the room at the murderous guy and gives that look that says “Bring it on!”....not shocked that evil exists, but ready for it, waiting for it, and prepared for it! But for many of us, confidence has seemed elusive. We were attacked and most of us were not ready for it. I sure wasn't ready for it. I wasn't ready when my family was attacked. I wasn't ready when my church was attacked. I was woefully unprepared. Many of us have reevaluated what we believe and where we stand on a multitude of issues. Things that seemed certain have been shaded in colors of gray. While this season of contemplation has been a rich time, a dig deep kind of time, few of us would describe it as a season of confidence.

Questioning is good. It is mature and necessary. However, it is so important to remember that our certainties far outweigh our questions and doubts. We may have questions about how to handle women's roles, how to reach the LGBTQ+ community while holding on to our

convictions, how to navigate political and social issues in an increasingly polarized world, but the things I know are greater than the things I don't know:

I have faith in HIM, in Jesus Christ.

I know who He was, what He did and where He is right now.

I know who I am without Him and would give my life to honor Him.

I know God's love and mercy in very intimate ways and I also know His holiness and might. He is worthy of worship, total devotion and I will bow before my King and give Him my life.

I know that the church of Jesus Christ is universal and eternal.

I know that we are on the winning side.

Let us be confident in our faith. Let's remember where we built our houses with each act of faithful obedience: on solid rock. Jesus Christ is a firm foundation. Make no mistake, the storms will come, but Jesus Christ can make me stand. He is solid therefore I am solid. There is nothing coming our way that makes our heavenly Father insecure, so let's not trifle for a moment in such useless enterprise. In fact, it is only because of that firm foundation, that certainty of what we DO know and obey, that we can feel confident in admitting the things that we don't know, in questioning and evaluating the things we are uncertain about. A person standing on a firm foundation can reach so much higher than someone whose feet are shifting.

It is time! It is time to stare down the devil and deliver a blow that knocks him off his feet.

I am not afraid anymore.

I am not afraid of what I don't know, the questions I can't answer or the uncertain future that Satan loves to hold over my head.

I am not afraid, because there is a future that I can be certain of. It has been bought and paid for by the blood of the lamb.

I am HIS, and Satan has nothing on HIM!

Stand confident sisters, for our confidence is in Christ.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are some of the things that I am very certain of from the scriptures and my relationship with God?
2. How can I better prepare for the attacks of Satan in the future?
3. How can I help arm my sisters for the battles ahead of us?

Today I will:

Focus on the things that I am certain about.

About the Author:

Mindi Kirklin currently leads the Cincinnati Church of Christ alongside her husband, Sean. She became a Christian in Sioux Falls, SD in 1996 and went into the ministry in Triangle, NC. She has so many rich relationships and memories with God's people in Triangle, in Louisville, KY and Lexington, KY before landing in Cincinnati in 2019. She has an adventurous spirit, a bit of a guilty soul and a deep love for her husband and two amazing teenagers.

Together We Thrive - The Power of a Circle of Friends

By Ayhanna Booker, Silver Spring, MD, USA

How do we thrive...

when you feel like you are in the valley of the shadow of death,
when you face trials of many kind, when you feel like every time you try to get into the pool
something gets in the way,
when you hear Jesus ask you if you want to get well and the frustration that comes from
believing you already said absolutely, yes, please heal me,
when you feel lost for words in prayer but you know that's all that you have hope in, yet you are
afraid of the answer, disappointed in the silence,
when you want to thrive but what you think it means to thrive seems impossible to do, and you
look to God to say what's impossible with man is possible with God,
when you know God is able and He is willing but even if He doesn't not you will not worship
any other God,
when thriving is simply walking with God through the dark places and trusting that He will take
you by your right hand and say do not be afraid because I am with,
when you have to repeatedly tell yourself that Jesus told Martha didn't I tell you that if you
believe you would see the glory of God and all you can say is I do believe help me overcome
my unbelief,
when you keep going back to the well of Jesus who has the living water because it's all you
have and
when you offer up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the One and Only who
could save you, heal him and redeem my children.

This is part of a conversation with God — not sure if I would call it a prayer — when I could not
sleep and I wanted to take my mind off of the many things that run through my head
regarding:

- my husband as he undergoes his third treatment to eradicate the cancerous cells that are
growing in his body,
- the faith and well-being of our three teenagers who are all beginning to leave our nest,
- ministering and leading a church
- and whatever else my brain can find and try to fix or control outcomes.

How do we thrive? **Together, together** with the friends and family, together with Jesus. Yet in
order to thrive together I have found that it takes the very uncomfortable, courageous and
scary state of vulnerability and trust that comes with sharing what is going on in these intimate
moments. Although it has been hard to do these things, it's in sharing, asking for and accepting
help, prayers, words of encouragement, etc. that I have been able to continue to give and
receive, have peace and hope and prayerfully whatever it means to "thrive".

I don't want you to remember my story and emotions, but I pray you are inspired by the band of women whose story inspires my faith no matter what is happening in my life.

A Model of Community—Girlfriends Growing and Built Up in Love

Allow me to introduce you to the women in Jesus' ministry, Mary Magdalene and her band of sister-friends, who flourished in the face of whatever came their way.

- A. **Mary Magdalene**--Mary Magdalene was said to have had seven demons that Jesus cast out of here. Many commentaries interpret this as her being immoral however it is quite possible that she suffered from some other type of demon possession that manifested as depression, mental or physical illness. Luke 8:1-3, Luke 24:10; Matt 27:61, 28:1-10; Mark 15:40-47, 16:1-11, John 20:1-18
- B. **Joanna**—She is mentioned in Luke 8:2 and Luke 24:10. She was the wife of a Cuza (who managed the household of Herod (this is the Herod responsible for the beheading of John)). She was a wealthy woman, accustomed to the comforts of worldliness. She had lived in an atmosphere of great power but chose to be amongst the community of believers –fishermen, poor people, tax collectors, etc. Because of her unique position, she must have faced many pressures to maintain her faithfulness to the Lord.
 - The test of perseverance: Was her husband supportive of her faith? Did he divorce her after awhile because she would not deny Jesus—we don't know the exact trials she faced. We can only imagine as we consider that she lived in the palace of the man who was present at the Lord's crucifixion, the son of the king (Herod) who tried to kill Jesus (Matt 2:13-20).
- C. **Susanna**—she was among those who travelled with Jesus. It does not say whether she was married or not, nonetheless she was probably respected and wealthy since she is included in the group of women who had been healed by Jesus of demon-possession or disease and supported his ministry. Luke 8:3.
- D. **Many others**—The following women may have been a part of this group. The woman that was subject to bleeding for 12 years (Luke 8:43-48). The woman known as the sinful woman described in Luke 7:37-50 who was set free from her sinful way of life. The woman who had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years (Luke 13:11-13). Simon's mother-in-law who suffered from a high fever (Luke 4:38-39).

Their demographics are not known but I am sure they were varied (married, widows, singles, older, younger, immoral backgrounds, virgins, outcast, in a family unit, rich and poor). But they had something in common they had been healed of evil spirits and diseases by Jesus and were eternally grateful to their Healer.

Anyone with a disease was an outcast, unclean, separated from friends, family and all that was familiar. The symptoms of demon possession in the New Testament was varied. Demon-possessed people were sometimes insane, as in the case of the two demon-possessed men

who lived in the graveyard (Matt 8:28-34). Sometimes demon-possession manifested itself in physical infirmities, such as blindness (Matt 12:22), deafness (Mark 9:25), an inability to speak (Matt 9:32-33), fits and seizures (Mark 1:26, Luke 9:38-40) and general infirmities (Luke 13:11-13).

Those possessed in the New Testament are portrayed as tormented people, not willful participants. They suffered terrible indignities at the hands of evil spirits. They were miserable, sorrowful, lonely, heartsick, forlorn and pitiable creatures. This was the condition of the women who followed Jesus as he went from town to town preaching the good news. But they were healed. Jesus established a community, all knit together, such that they were able to face the things ahead. These women once ostracized and isolated discovered the meaning of belonging and relationship.

Consider the challenges associated with the women who had been in isolation over a long period of time. I am sure she had trust issues, she had a hard time sharing her heart. Not to mention when you are in isolation you need not consider the needs of anyone else. "Looking out for #1" must have been their mantra. Yet, the gratitude produced by God's gracious hand upon them taught them to say no to individualism, it's all about me, etc.

The women were courageous. While courage has often been seen as a male virtue, as we read about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus the women are not seen as merely anxious but as actually courageous. They are the 1st to witness the resurrection and therefore commissioned to share the good news. There was great danger involved in association with Jesus at the cross and after the cross. As evidenced by the disciples reaction, the disciples fled and denied association. But take note, that the male disciples were alone—Peter was by himself in the temple courts when he denied Jesus. Luke 22:54-62. Judas had separated himself from the disciples. John 20:24 speaks of Thomas' absence from the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. The women, however, are said to be together at the cross (Matt 27:55-56); together at his burial (Luke 23:55-56) and together to witness the resurrected Jesus (Luke 24:1-10).

Question: What was cultivated between these women while they travelled with Jesus? Perhaps they learned from his vulnerability/humility to rely on one another just as he relied on them. They remained physically close and took care of each others needs. Even more, God chose not to be independent of us, but came as Christ who humbled himself by becoming one of us and belonging to us.

- The women were probably up all night preparing the spices and perfume as a final act of service for their Lord, the one they loved. It must have been quite a night—subdued conversation, busy hands, questions, memories, tears, smiles, shattered dreams, uncertain hope. Question: Did they remind each other of what he said as they expressed doubt, frustration, anger, hopelessness, etc. I need this from you and I hope to be that for you.

- **This sense of community definitely had to be learned.** Surely, between the demon possession and the diseases these women had, they were left isolated, alone. They had never experienced community (love for one another) and they probably learned to mistrust or not believe it. To them community could have meant uniformity, oppression and control where one group feels left out, overlooked, short-changed. As a result, in all likelihood this band of women could have drifted toward self-sufficiency and rejected any permanent relationships (recall that they were able to support Jesus' ministry so they had financial means and not all of them were married).

They maintained this unity even after the resurrection. In all likelihood they were among the women named in Acts 1:14 who joined together in constantly in prayer with the apostles. And they were the reason we now have Acts 2:42-47 as an example for how we can have koinonia (Greek *-fellowship*) In order for us to have this genuine fellowship within the Church, each person must be open, trusting and willing to be actively involved in each others' lives — giving and borrowing each others faith, hope and love.

May the LORD cause you to flourish. Psalm 115:14

About the Author

Ayhanna Booker serves as a Women's Ministry Leader along side her husband of 23 years, and a team of faithful disciples of Christ in Maryland near Washington, D.C. in the US. She loves walking together with the women in her community—studying God's Word, praying, practicing spiritual disciplines for transformation, loving God and living out faith as one. She has had the honor and privilege of teaching classes for the Ministry Training on Men and Women working Together in Ministry, Spiritual Growing & the Empathy of Christ, the Holy Spirit, Redemptive Preaching, New Testament Survey of Women, Spiritual Disciplines for Transformation along with a host of other topics. Currently, she is in the adventurous season of raising and launching three beautiful teenagers.

Together We Thrive - I Am With You Heart and Soul!

By Angela Stuck, Yorktown, VA, USA

When I think of a thriving partnership in the OT that tackled great things for God, I think of Jonathan and his armor bearer. They were a spiritual power house. The odds were stacked against them, but together they overcame the odds, with God's help!

Scripture Reading:

1 Samuel 14:1-7, 14-15

The armor-bearer's response in verse 7 sounds more eloquent in the Hebrew - literally it means: "I am with you like your heart is with you." This constitutes a pledge of unwavering support for whatever actions Jonathan might take. This degree of loyalty would be needed, especially in view of Jonathan's blueprint for action. (Bergen, R. D. (1996). 1, 2 Samuel (Vol. 7, p. 156). Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

They were facing an impossible task. It was the two of them against an army of Philistines. Nothing about Jonathan's plan made sense. It defied all military logic. Why was his armor-bearer so loyal? What did he see? What prompted him to have such a deep level of respect for Jonathan?

Perhaps Jonathan's faith in God inspired his armor-bearer. Jonathan knew God was in control, not him. Maybe Jonathan recalled Joshua - and his dying words to Israel's leaders in Joshua 23:2-3 *"I am now old and well advanced in years. And you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the Lord your God who has fought for you."* And Joshua 23:10-11 *"One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, just as he promised you. Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God."*

I dearly desire to imitate Jonathan and his faith, but in all honesty I can be more like Saul, who instead retreated to a distant pomegranate cave, safely out of the way. The last three years has been tough for everyone. I remember being excited to welcome 2023. I was excited to see all that God would do; I was excited to begin seeing more victories than hardships; I was excited to see the battles behind me. That was not the case. 2023 ended up being one of the most challenging of my 28 years as a Christian. Challenges quickly mounted to include helping my husband as he grieved the death of his sister and step-father, transitioning my mother from our home to an assisted living facility to meet her increasing needs, moving my daughter and her family (including 2 grandchildren!) 2500 miles away as they began a new role of leadership in fellowship of churches. In the midst of all of this, I wanted to stay in the cave. I didn't want to be the one to lead anyone in battle. I also didn't see many people wanting to take risks for God. But staying in the cave wasn't going to help me or anyone else around me to embrace

greater faith. I am so grateful for the women in my life who did give their hearts to me and were willing to stand firm to make faithful decisions. I would not be where I am today without women who were with me "heart and soul". This past year has been a year of transition and refinement, and I am looking forward to seeing all that God will do in the years to come.

God fights for us - Jonathan knew this. His armor bearer, fueled by trust, was willing to go with him. While the rest of the army slept, these two men did something courageous and God provided a miracle for them. (1 Sam 14:23)

Reflection Questions:

Who are faithful women in your life who trust God's sovereignty and are willing to take leaps of faith to do great things for God? Let them know you feel that way about them. And let them know that you'd like to do something faithful with them.

What fears tempt you to stay in the "cave"? How can you overcome those fears?

Prayer:

Take a moment to write down the names of the "Jonathan's" in your life and pray for them. Pray to imitate the faithful partnership Jonathan and his armor bearer had. Write a letter of gratitude to God for the Godly relationships He has placed in your life.

About the Author:

Angela Stuck currently leads the Hampton Roads Christ alongside her husband, Corey. Together Corey and Angela have 3 children: Alexa (married to Coleman), Ryan and Jordan. She became a christian in Northern Virginia in 1995. After serving in Hampton Roads, their family moved to Richmond, Virginia and then to London, England where they served on the mission field for the London Church of Christ. Their adventure with God led them back to Richmond and then home to Hampton Roads for the past 5 years. Angela loves serving God's people alongside her many friends. She is currently enjoying her new roll as a Grandparent (aka "Lula") and has a handsome grandson and beautiful granddaughter to shower with love.

Together We Thrive - In the Glorious Inheritance of His Holy People

By Beth Bruns, Charlottesville, VA, USA

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 1:18-23. *I pray that the **eyes of your heart may be enlightened** in order that you may know **the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,** ¹⁹ and **his incomparably great power for us who believe.** That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the **church,** ²³ **which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way***

What do your eyes tend to notice as you participate in fellowship? All too often, I most notice our human failings and even our differences. But then I was pleasantly startled by Paul's prayer here for my eyes to be opened and focused on our collective reasons to celebrate - divine hope, riches, and power.

This encouragement from Paul to the Ephesians (and to us) brings clarity to the idea of "Together We Thrive." This passage underscores the powerful blessings received in community that far outstrip the power of any individual. This is such a compelling thought and yet, sometimes our differences are more apparent than our common purpose or our common beauty as a church. Unity can be hard to hold on to. We can be bothered by 'that sister' or 'that preaching' or 'that weakness that is so apparent' in our church fellowship. We can embrace a consumerism that there are better churches or better fellowships out there instead of our imperfect body of believers that we worship with every week. Sometimes, the eyes of our hearts are not as enlightened as they could be about the glorious inheritance that we all have. If we could only see more clearly, we could thrive more majestically with each other in God's church. Paul encourages clearer vision for three things to support thriving. They are-

- 1) Hope from our calling. This is a hope that comes from the gospel of Jesus, salvation, and the good news that we are meant to share broadly and widely with a lost world.
- 2) The riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people. The church is glorious. And it is our inheritance.
- 3) His incomparably great power for us who believe. This is the power that raised Jesus from the dead and works in our lives as we thrive together.

Living in our church community is a blessing. It propagates hope, a thriving inheritance together, with the power of the resurrection.

Reflection Questions

- How do you see His body, your fellowship, as the fullness of God?
- How open are the eyes of your heart in terms of knowing, really knowing, the three things that Paul refers to; hope of our calling, riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his great power? How might you grow the eyes of your heart?

About the Author:

Beth Bruns currently leads the Blue Ridge Church of Christ alongside her husband, Phil. She became a Christian in Cincinnati, OH in 1986 as a campus student. She worked and retired as an engineer in R&D prior to going in the ministry in 2021 in Charlottesville, VA. She loves being in the ministry with the time and freedom that early retirement brings. She has a deep love for her husband and for her four amazing daughters who are spread across the east coast and midwest.

Together We Thrive - Speaking the Truth in Love

By Jenn Hutchins, Virginia Beach, VA, USA

Scripture Reading:

Ephesian 4:14-16 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Recently, my husband and I had the wonderful privilege of visiting a church in a beautiful tropical area of our country with friends. We were struck by the glorious sight of the ocean, in all its power and majesty. We visited a certain beach, with a reputation for wonderful sea life and even sea turtles, but also thunderous waves! Our two husbands ventured out first, to see if it was safe and worth the hassle of swimming past the huge waves. After a long swim, they came back like the twelve spies in Deuteronomy 1, with glowing reports. They saw many unique and colorful fish, interesting and beautiful sea urchins, and two sea turtles! My husband said (and I quote), "The waves are no big deal; once you swim past them, it is pretty calm. It's totally worth it!" So my friend and I ventured out. I was wearing flippers, but she was not. I kept checking to make sure she stayed with me, but she kept drifting out. As we surveyed the ocean bottom, supposedly perusing the glorious sights, of which there were many, my head was a bouncing ball, up and down checking my surroundings. The swells, that were supposed to be no big deal, had increased in size, and were heaving us up and down and towards the shore, then sucking us back out. Though amazing things were all around us, I was distracted, fearful, worried about my friend with no flippers, who seemed to be constantly drifting out farther, stressed, and just all around miserable. We worked our way back in after a short while. "Wasn't that incredible?" my husband asked, expectantly.

As I contemplated the passage in Ephesians 4, I couldn't help thinking of this occasion. I was not thinking of Jesus, nor at peace, while being blown and tossed by the wind and the waves. When we are in that state, we lack the joy and appreciation for all of the glorious blessings God has given us and the miracles happening all around us. Often we don't even realize the influence that the world has on us, and the teaching from it that seeps in and shapes our hearts and our thinking. Satan, the Deceiver, loves to send us into confusion. Social media shapes us, with "essentials" for every area of our lives. We are influenced by others in our life stage, and current cultural (but worldly) norms can weaken our biblical convictions. But the scripture says that instead of being blown and tossed by every wind of teaching, we need to *speak the truth in love to one another*, so that we will grow and mature. This scripture is not talking about telling each other everything we need to work on in our character, but rather speaking the truth about Christ! Paul encourages us to do this in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 as well. We need to continually remind one another to focus on Jesus, the perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2). Paul models this for us in Colossians 3:1-3. After speaking extensively on the

supremacy of Christ, he tells us to fix our hearts and minds on things above, when surrounded by the wind and waves of this world. The disciples of Paul's day were familiar with the account of Peter actually walking on water, and of Jesus rebuking the wind and the waves during a storm. These accounts would probably have come to their minds, when hearing these words in Paul's letter. Much like today, those disciples would have been surrounded by many worldly teachings and fine-sounding arguments, and would have needed the support of one another to remember Jesus. To people of that day, the sea was a place of trepidation, symbolizing mystery and destruction. That is our world! We need to remind one another regularly of where our focus needs to be — on the life and heart of Jesus! Just as my friend needed me to make sure she did not drift too far out to sea, I needed her to help me appreciate the beauty all around me under the surface! Let's thrive together and resist the voices of the world blowing and tossing us, and instead, love each other by speaking the truth to one another about our Lord: the One who rebukes the storms and walks above the waves!

Reflection Questions:

1. What "wind and waves" may be preventing you from maturing in Christ, perhaps with worry, fear, a lack of gratitude, a lack of peace, or confusion? What area of knowledge about Christ do you need growth in to overcome these issues? Who could speak the truth of Christ to you in these areas to help you mature?
2. Why do you think Paul tells us to speak the truth *in love* to one another? What does that look like for you? What would speaking the truth look or sound like, without love? What would lead us to speaking it without love?
3. Read Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. In what ways do you see yourself, or others around you, speaking the truth in love about Christ? In what ways can you take this further, and to whom?

About the Author

Jennifer Hutchins currently serves as a deacon's wife alongside her husband Paul in the Hampton Roads Church in Virginia, USA. She became a Christian in Toronto, Canada in 1985. She has served in the full time ministry in Toronto and Vancouver Canada and then as unpaid ministry staff in Los Angeles and currently in Virginia in the US. Her recent retirement as an elementary school teacher has enabled her to fully devote her time to the ministry. She is among the first women to serve on the board of the Hampton Roads Church. She enjoys authoring children's books, traveling and hiking. She has three adult children, a grandson and another grandchild on the way.

Together We Thrive: Navigating Conflict by Speaking Truth in Love

By Joann Acosta, Capital Collective Church, Washington DC, USA

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 4:1-3, 14-16, 25, 29 (NIV)

1-3 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace...

14-16 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

We've all been there: someone has hurt you, has sinned or could benefit greatly from your help in identifying an area of life-giving growth or repentance. The question isn't usually whether you should speak the truth to them. Many places in Scripture (Lev 19:5, Mt 18:15-17, Gal 6:1-2, James 5:19-20 Mt 5:23-24) clearly spell out that we are to speak to our brother or sister. But it is in Ephesians 4 that Paul gives more of the WHY and the HOW of our approach.

The Power of WHY

Early in my marriage of 21 years, the number one source of conflict between me and Ben was in our styles of communication. I have always been a very direct, "tell it like it is" speaker, while he leaned more toward a "overlook the offense" approach. I would feel frustrated whenever I would learn that there was something I was doing that had been bothering him (for months!) that he didn't mention. "Why didn't you say something," I'd cry. "We need to be honest with each other." In my mind, direct communication was love. I told myself he didn't even need to sugar-coat it. (Truth: We all need a little sugar!)

On the flip side, I not only shared with Ben what I saw that he could change, I told him repeatedly and in many ways, colors and flavors - all so that he could "truly understand" the truth. Needless to say, he would often wind up tuning me out. Furthermore, sisters I strove to encourage in their repentance would sometimes share that they felt rebuked rather than loved.

I was baffled. Didn't they want to hear the truth? Was I doing something wrong? (Spoiler... Yes!)

We all lean toward one end of the spectrum: shrinking away from conflict and not speaking up when life-giving truth needs to be shared, or landing "truth bombs" that can make hearers feel like they just got punched in the face. There is a wide range in between, including a perfect sweet spot that Jesus - full of grace and truth - hit every time. (Take a self-assessment: where do you fall on the spectrum?)

Notice how in Ephesians 4:16, Paul didn't just say, "speak the truth." He adds those essential two little words: "in love." Why, Paul? Isn't it good enough to speak the truth for truth's sake? Isn't truth the end goal? Short answer, no.

As with most things of God, we must dig down past outward behavior (and words) to get to our hearts. Speaking truth requires a constant check on our motivation. Why am I sharing the truth? Is it because something irritates, annoys, or angers me? Because something inconveniences or hurts me? Do I have even a twinge of contempt in my heart toward my sister or brother because of their wrongdoing?

Scripture teaches us that from the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). Any truth spoken from a place of anger, irritation, or fear will likely bear bad fruit (Mt 7:17-20). I must make every effort to get my heart to a place where what I care most about in my exchange with my sister is that I build her up and, by default, the kingdom as well. Note, there is a subtle yet critical difference between wanting to correct a person and wanting to build them up. One comes from a place of judgment, the other from a place of love.

In short, my WHY must be to build up my brother or sister and the kingdom of God. All other reasons fall short.

The Power of HOW

Paul's earlier exhortation in Ephesians 4:1-3 lays the foundation for HOW we speak the truth in love. We are called to live a life worthy of the calling we have received, characterized by humility, gentleness, patience, and love. Paul had earlier instructed the Galatians "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently."

Gently.

Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Love.

Do these qualities describe your interactions in conflict? As modern women, we often navigate a world that calls us to be confident, decisive, quick-acting and assertive. We're often in a hurry and can speak with sharpness to make a point. God's countercultural calling for us to be humble, gentle, patient and loving is an essential part of our "every effort" to bring about unity in the body of Christ.

In my quest to speak the truth with humility, gentleness, patience and love, I like to ask myself these questions:

Will what I say and the manner in which I say it build my listener up? Ephesians 4:29 says "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." Nowadays, in my interactions with my husband or anyone else, rather than airing out any opinion I have about their actions the moment it crosses my mind (Prov 18:1), I take time to ponder if what I have to share is truly of benefit.

"Is this the right time for me or my listener for me to speak? Proverb 25:11 says "The right word spoken at the right time is as beautiful as gold apples in a silver bowl." If either I or my listener is upset, hurried or distracted, it's likely not a good time to have a beneficial conversation.

"Does this person have the emotional capacity at this moment to handle what I plan to share?" Earlier in my faith, I thought of softening my words as equivalent to watering down the truth. I have since come to see the wisdom of meeting people where they are. While some hearers appreciate directness, some need to be spoken to with extra, extra, extra tenderness. While I may need you to speak to me with clarity and examples, others may require just a light touch coupled with much encouragement in order to receive the message. You will often be able to tell the difference by how the person is responding as you speak. Are they tense, nodding along, defensive, teary-eyed?

If I am not sure of my hearer's processing style, I err in the direction of that extra, extra tenderness. This may include leaning in, a soft voice, a lead-up that includes an inquiry into their well-being, or a gentle touch - quite possibly all of the above! So often, hearers have unresolved past trauma that makes them susceptible to being wounded easily. Never let it be through me that my brother or sister, who is already hurting from the lashes Satan has inflicted on them, be unnecessarily wounded by me even further.

If you had an upbringing like mine, correction came with a stern voice that conveyed the seriousness of what had been done. There was no light touch or statement of belief in me that I could change and be a better person. Instead, there was shaming. I believe my parents passed on what they had been taught and that they truly meant well: they wanted to make sure I saw the error of my ways and changed. I, in turn, had passed that on in my corrections. I have since learned that inspiring someone to change by communicating your faith in God and in them goes much further than the temporary behavior change that occurs by using the truth club to make someone feel bad. I have also learned that the exact same words spoken in a gentle voice actually have more impact than when said in a stern tone that gets my listener's defenses up!

Heart check done? Now speak up!

Speaking truth in love fosters unity and the church's transformation into the likeness of Christ. This is why we do it. Period. My conversation between me and another is never *just* about the

two of us, but the kingdom as well. That conversation has a massive ripple effect that transcends to the spiritual realm!

I think of Nathan who had the nerve to approach King David to declare "You are that man!" when David was deep in sin. David could have killed Nathan. Nathan's courage and conviction led to David restoring his relationship with God, and Scripture indicates that the future of the entire kingdom hinged on David's repentance. What an act of love on Nathan's part! He saved David when he turned David from the error of his ways. Do you have the courage and conviction to speak the truth despite the cost (inconvenience, discomfort, possible turmoil, someone not liking you) to your brother or sister? Better question: do you have the *love* to speak up?

Truth spoken in love has the power to bring about growth, both individually and collectively within the body of Christ. When we approach one another with sincerity, compassion, and a genuine desire for each other's well-being, the result is a community that matures and reflects the likeness of Christ.

Final thoughts...

You've prayed, you've wrestled, your conscience is clear. You may have even gotten input about how you can speak the truth (without bringing up the name of the person you are in conflict with, if possible). What if your conversation doesn't go well even if you have spoken the truth with patience, tenderness, love and grace?

This happens. If Jesus, who was perfect, offended others to the point that they killed him, don't be surprised if you don't always get a warm response to your correction, even from a brother or sister. Hard truths can stir up uncomfortable and painful feelings, which can lead to anger, lashing out, or pulling away.

This is when I find comfort in Matthew 18:15-16: "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" I love the wisdom of God who anticipated that confrontation between brothers and sisters won't always go well. In situations in which I have asked sisters to step in to mediate a conflict, I never share my version of events first; just the fact that we are in conflict. My goal is not to win people over to my side. I want unity. I want to see where *I* can change along with my sister.

Practicals

Ask yourself: "What is my motivation for sharing this hard truth with this person?"

Ask yourself: "Is there a plank I need to take out of my own eye?" (Mt 7:4-5) Unless it's removed, I cannot see clearly to remove the speck out of my brother's eye. Deal with my own junk first, THEN help my sister out.

Seek counsel about *your own heart* before heading into a possibly contentious conversation. Too often we assume we have the correct perspective and when we seek advice, what we are really seeking is validation for our own point of view! (But maybe that's just me.)

PRAY for wisdom and discernment prior, during and after every conversation in which you need to confront sin. Pray for tenderness, grace, love and humility. It's amazing how prayer alone shapes our hearts and gives us courage to speak and wisdom to bite our tongues when necessary!

Do an emotions check. Do you have a calm, non-anxious demeanor? I like to take inventory of my own body to make a feelings assessment. Do you feel tense? Do you have a tight neck or shoulders, or an upset stomach? Are your shoulders by my ears? Do you feel heated? Or do you feel a warm, overflowing compassion and desire for oneness?

Test the temperature. Is the person ready to receive your words? You may have a conversation planned, then find out the other person just suffered a major personal loss. Tend to that wound first.

Never assume you understand a situation or a person's heart. Ask questions. Gain understanding. Usually, we don't know the complete story and often, what we planned to say will change once we have more accurate information.

Attain and convey a spirit of "I am on your side" and "we are in this together," because you are!

Ask, "May I share something with you?" If the person says "yes," they have opened the door. You don't need to ram your way in.

After sharing your perspective, ask the person how they feel about what was shared. Let them know you are a safe space for them to be honest and that you respect their feelings. They are just that: feelings (which is different from beliefs, which may be incorrect). Invite them to share more feelings at a later time that they may not have processed at that moment.

Ask how they plan to respond. This is different from asking how they feel. They may feel one way but have the resolve to do another. For example someone may feel hurt and angry - and voices that - but also acknowledge that they will go and pray, process, and repent. If you have the bandwidth, ask how you can help them move forward.

If the conversation gets heated, ask for a time out. You can share, "I am feeling myself getting upset and I don't want to say anything that could hurt our friendship. Would it be okay for us to come back and talk about this in X amount of time? I need more time to pray."

If at all possible, have hard conversations face to face - never through written communication, which is too easily misinterpreted. Even online meetings are less effective since the body language is unseen (a more significant part of communication than words), and physical touch is not possible. A gentle hand, a leaning in, and hands clasped together in prayer are balms that help soften the words of a correction or hard teaching.

Contemplative Questions:

- Reflect on a time when someone spoke the truth to you in love. How did that experience contribute to your personal growth?
- If you tend to avoid conflict: How can you incorporate the principle of speaking the truth in love in your daily interactions with others, both within and outside the church community?
- In what ways can you cultivate a spirit of gentleness in your relationships, ensuring that your interactions reflect the humility and patience Paul encourages in Ephesians 4:1-3?

May God bless your courage and conviction to speak the truth in love. Thank you, sister, for building up, unifying, and maturing God's kingdom in this way. xo

About the Author

Joann Acosta serves as a shepherd alongside her husband, Ben, in the newly planted Capital Collective Church in Washington DC. in the US. She has served in the full-time ministry in both Philadelphia (where she became a Christian in 1989) and in Indianapolis, but spent the bulk of her career as a journalist in Philadelphia, New Jersey and Ohio writing mostly about politics, education and business. These days, Joann can be found slaking her social justice thirst by mentoring and tutoring underserved students in inner city DC and serving on nonprofit boards. When she is not heading Ben's fan club or wrangling Benjamin and Alex (her teenage boys), she can be found belly laughing with friends, traveling, enjoying the DC food scene or curling up with a good book (coffee in hand of course).

Together We Thrive - Sharing the Fullness of Christ

By Barb Finch, Bowling Green, KY, USA

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 4:11-13. It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

In many ancient cultures when a king won a battle, he would share the bounty with his troops and kingdom. Thus, the king encouraged the hearts of his troops after a difficult battle and fortified his kingdom with much needed supplies. Historians are familiar with this practice, but we can find examples of this practice in our Bibles as well (1 Sam. 30:21-25). Ancient kings often bestowed gifts on their people for numerous reasons outside of war. Likewise (and in the most perfect manner), Israel's ultimate king, the God of heaven and earth, regularly bestowed gifts and blessings on his peoples (Gen. 12:1-3, Lev. 26:3-13)

The significance for us to understand these practices today is *our* king, this same eternal God, is King Jesus (Luke 1:32-33). He bestows gifts and blessings on his people. The apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:11-13 that God has a purpose for these amazing gifts. The divine intention of these gifts is to prepare us, God's people, for "works of service". These gift-initiated works of service build us up together in unity, faith and knowledge. Moreover, we then become mature in Christ, *completely* full in him! Notice that these blessings are not for us to keep to ourselves and hide them in our hearts. May it never be! They are to bring service both to the Church and to mankind, maturing and filling *each of us* in Christ. It seems that through Paul, God is teaching us that we, in faith and knowledge and maturity, become completely full in Christ. We thrive as the body of Christ! What an amazingly divine and eternal King we celebrate together.

Pondering this image of Christ's unified, integrated body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) is both inspiring and refreshing in today's individualistic culture. However, putting his gifts into practice in our daily lives proves more difficult. I have noticed in my years of discipleship that recognizing our own talents and gifts is often tough to grasp. Not only that, it is likewise difficult to correctly deploy our talents in ways that benefit Christ's church powerfully and effectively. At times we wield our talents pridefully, scarring the hearts of those around us. Other times we bury our talents deep in the sand, striving either to avoid attention to ourselves or to avoid engaging in God's work so that we can stay within our world of comfort and familiarity. For me personally these are the battle-grounds I reside in all too regularly.

Early in my walk with God I noticed that I was able to use my strengths in communication and perception to serve the body. I was quickly "raised up" to lead different levels of Bible studies

with groups as well as individuals. Nonetheless, I was far from understanding how to serve God without taking the glory for myself. I would either bask in the light of pride or quickly spiral down to the depths of insecurity and self-loathing. Both extremes seemed to me an endless cycle of “me, myself and I.” They often left a wake of broken relationships, deflated Bible studies and at times people failing to see Christ no less want to follow Christ. I needed help outside of myself to guide and teach me to use my gifts correctly without the taint of inward focus.

Thank goodness for the unimaginable, boundless strengths of God’s compassion and mercy (Romans 7:24-25). He has continually and lovingly guided me through these deep waters of pride and insecurities (while protecting those caught in the wake of my sins). His unrelenting love redirects through the caring coaching of Christians, through the study of His Word, and through prayer. I have needed courageous brothers and sisters to tell me when I am puffed up with pride or deflated through my own self pity. One friend, with a broken heart, even told me I didn’t know how to be a friend and that she would pray for me to learn how to “need” people. It took several years and a move to New York to finally *begin* to grasp what she was trying to tell me. God has always been revealing to me his love and compassion; however, it seems that I am slow to recognize his ways. Without the help of others, I often fail to recognize God’s hunger for me to mature in Him through the gifts He provides.

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

1 Co 14:26

Now, over 40 years later, I am enjoying the fullness of Christ in ways I’ve never imagined (thank you to the ones who have patiently helped me). I continue to learn how to give His amazing gifts to anyone that will hear. I am still being lovingly disciplined by my father (Hebrews 12:4-12) and am striving to always be learning and growing. My prayer is to truly be:

1. A woman of God that uses her talents to shine God’s amazing light on a world of unyielding darkness.
2. A woman who deeply listens to God’s discipline through His Word, others and prayer by always seeking help.
3. A woman gifted by God, helping to continually strengthen his body of believers.
4. United with others, thriving in the complete fullness of Christ.

*This is the way of the Lord.
What an incredible gift to be in the body of Christ!*

Reflection Questions:

1. What are some gifts that God has blessed you with? How can they be refined to build up and help the church thrive?

2. Who are some of the women in your life that can either help you identify your, God given gifts or help you implement your gifts for works of service?
3. Are there sisters in your life that you can help identify their gifts and/or help them implement their gifts for works of service?

About the Author

Barbara Finch is currently serving The Bowling Green Church along side her husband, Sean, as a Shepherding Couple. She became a Christian in Louisville, KY in 1981. She worked closely with the Chemical Recovery Ministry in Louisville, KY while she also served secularly as a Sergeant in the Sheriffs Department and later a Social Worker. In 1993 she moved to New York City to train further in the Chemical Recovery Ministry. While in New York, she became happily married and adopted two wonderful children from Cambodia. She also served the Big East Super Region in The New York Church as an administrative assistant. In 2003 she and her family moved back to Louisville, KY due to an illness in the family. After serving in Louisville as a Small group and Family group leader, she and her family relocated to Bowling Green, Kentucky to help in a small church planting. She loves to dig deeply in her Bible, teaching and writing with every opportunity.

Together We Thrive - Gifts to Build the Body

By Melina Hutchins, Blacksburg, VA, USA

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 4:11-13. *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

When I consider the idea of “together we thrive,” I think about this passage! It would seem that the plan for unity, maturity and being formed more and more into Christ involves a diversity of gifts and talents all working towards building up God’s church. Seeing a group of believers that each have their role within a church is such a wonderful thing to observe. It is like experiencing heaven on earth, which is what Jesus calls us to pray for in Matthew 6:10. “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven.” For Jesus, this is a crucial part of our prayer life — asking for heaven to fill our reality! Jesus is inviting us to participate in God’s work of bringing heaven to earth! God longs to partner with us, in our unique places and in our unique spaces to do this.

Verse 11, lists 5 roles, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors/shepherds and teachers. Depending on which church tradition you grew up in, you may or may not be familiar with these roles. I grew up in this family of churches and I really only knew of evangelists in church (maybe an elder every once in a while). So when I would read this passage, I didn’t think there was anything applicable to me. However, I believe that we all have strengths that can lean into these roles. In fact, these gifts begin to reveal themselves even as children. I think we can more easily see certain types of careers for our children, I remember being eight years old taking a career prediction test and I loved it! I loved having a vision for my future and it helped me lean into developing the skills I needed for my future job in “healthcare” (turned out to be *spiritual* healthcare).

I don’t think it’s wrong to imagine success for our future, our children’s future, our siblings’ future or our friends’ future - but what would happen if we channelled that excitement and vision into how all those people (ourselves, our kids, siblings & friends) could bring life to the church and find their very important place in building up the kingdom of God in this world?

During one of our midweeks, we decided to focus on this scripture and then we took some time to take an APEST (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds/pastors, and teachers) test which is basically a test that asks you a bunch of questions based on your preferences and values to see which spiritual gifting you most align with. Once we had our answers we broke up into our “groups” and we were tasked with coming up with ideas on how we can use our gifts to build up the church. It was really fun to see people come alive and see themselves with more of a vision for how they could have ownership within the church.

Personally, I felt convicted seeing some people I viewed as “disruptive” as a prophet. I realized in that moment, that although I lean more naturally to Shepherd and Teacher, it doesn’t mean that those who speak out are wrong. I realized that I am timid and I would rather have quiet and emotional conversations because of the fear of conflict. It made me view those “disruptors” in a completely new and grateful light.

Here is a basic definition of each role and a wonderful example of each type of person in my life:

Apostle - “sent one” the initiator. Builds relationships in new communities and is good at converting others via building friendships.

My mom: Rosario Cruz, my mother can corral people and fit right into any community she finds herself in. She serves and laughs with people as if they have known each other for their whole lives. As a teen, I did not enjoy waiting in the car for my mom after church as me and my siblings withered away due to hunger, anxiously awaiting our post-church meal. As an adult, I see how her time at church was used to minister to so many, even if my teenage self rolled my eyes at everything she did.

Prophet - “the one who speaks up” sensitive to the righteousness and needs of the community

My mother-in-law: Jennifer Hutchins can easily empathize with all people and considers everyone’s unique situation. Like Jesus, she is quick to speak truth to power in her fight for justice. There is never a question in her mind when it comes standing up for others and being a voice for the voiceless regardless of how it may disrupt the comfortable way. Truly her courage is admirable.

Evangelist - “the bringer of others” adds to the church by introducing friends to the gospel

My father-in-law: Paul Hutchins is the first to give you a hug, a smile, connect you with someone else who can give you a job, invite you into his home, or find you a great deal on a used car. Literally anything to do with connecting people is what he is good at. You will often find Paul... actually you won’t find him because he is off somewhere meeting the new neighbor or new person at church.

Shepherd - “the nurturer” strengthens the spiritual and emotional development of the church

My dad: German Cruz, who all of my siblings and I can attest to the most life changing conversations as teens, being with my dad. He is a fantastic listener, knows how to create a place of safety, asks great questions and then he hits you with a line or two of deep wisdom

that has a way of somehow changing the trajectory of our lives. My dad was the first one who knew my first period was coming... and then he always knew when it was coming!

Teacher - "the philosopher" mediates wisdom and understanding in the church

My husband: Benjamin Hutchins. Being married to someone who is a teacher means that you are going to be learning a lot. I have learned so much from my husband and I admire his desire for knowledge. He always has a book in hand and is ready to have a discussion with anyone who may have opposing thoughts, not to fight but to learn! My husband doesn't gain knowledge to build himself up. He genuinely wants people to learn as much as they can about God. He meets people where they are at. It is amazing to see people benefit from his gifts.

Reflection Questions:

1. What about you? What are your gifts? Are you withholding your gifts out of fear or insecurity?
2. Take some time to pray that God can reveal your spiritual gifts to you, then put it in to practice!
3. Take an APEST test yourself to give you some direction (there are many online options). Ask others what they see in you!
4. Knowing our gifts can make us wonderful servants in God's church so that we can all attain the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

About the Author

Melina Hutchins currently leads the New River Valley Church in Blacksburg, VA in the US alongside her husband Benjamin Hutchins. She grew up in Toronto, Canada and moved to Virginia when she married her husband in 2018. She has two children, her first child Sofia passed away due to stillbirth and her little brother Judah is 1. She and her husband love to travel, enjoy the outdoors and they have a passion for the teaching ministry.