

## New Hope Sermon Exhortation

This past week and next week is Winter Olympics time. And it's a big global event: 2,920 athletes from 92 nations are competing in 102 events in 15 sports of speed skating, snowboarding, freestyle skiing, ice dancing figure skating, singles and pairs, bobsled, luge, cross-country skiing, and more. If you saw the Opening Ceremony on the 9<sup>th</sup>, you could see the multitudes of young people who came in, waving with enthusiasm as they prepared to prove their excellence in their chosen sport. In the words of this high point in global sport, this is a time when they will experience "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat."

In Turin Italy at the 2006 Winter Olympics Shawn White entered as a 19 year old sensation in snowboarding. With his red hair and acrobatic feats as he sailed 17 feet over the half pipe twisting and somersaulting in the air, he became the poster boy for this new sport. He was called the flying tomato. He won gold. He won gold 4 years later in Vancouver in 2010. But at Sochi Russia in 2014, he fell and was not even on the podium. He faced failure. Defeat. Shame. Doubt. He let down his country and seemed washed up, finished – already surpassed by the younger athletes who saw his as their idol. "That loss led him to do more than a fair amount of soul-searching in the aftermath. His life became more complex. Injuries started to pile up. ..In the interim the sport that he defined went on without him."(Will Graces, "Whiteout: Make it 3 golds," *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago Sports, Wed. Feb. 14, 2018, p. 7).



What do we do with a searing defeat? It leads some to retreat, to give up their goals, to slide from discouragement to depression. I don't know all Shawn's backstory of the years between Sochi and this winter Olympics in South Korea, but I believe there had to be coaches and family or friends who exhorted him to stay in the game. People who held him to the highest of who he is and what he could still do. People who wouldn't let him stay defeated and have what the Bible pictures as "*arms that hang down, weak knees and a lameness that disables.*" (Heb. 12:1213). That describes a soul state as well as physical state.

For such people and circumstances there is a role for the Spirit-led exhorter. Tuesday evening at the winter Olympics in South Korea Shawn White was in the game again, competing for the goal in snowboarding the half pipe. He was 31, the oldest competitor in his sport and Hirano, a young Japanese whiz kid at 19, had posted a 9525 as the top gold contender. One more run awaited. Hirano washed out on his final run but Shawn did not. He put down the run of his life for a 97.75 and won the gold at the games. It was a stirring comeback and redemption for the man who had defined the sport. And it was not an individual achievement. There was a team behind Shawn who helped him recover and reach again for his highest. It was more than enough.

The word exhort in the Greek has many layers. The Greek for Acts 11:23, 1 Thes 5:11 and Heb 3:13 are all the same word: parakaleo. The word is translated differently in different passages according to context as it has a multi-layered meaning. παρακαλέω (parakaleō) 'to plead/comfort' (G3870) to ask, beg, plead; to comfort, encourage, exhort, urge; to call, inviting and to call upon, exhort, admonish, persuade, Lk. 3:18; Acts 2:40; 11:23; to beg, beseech, entreat, implore, Mt. 8:5, 31; 18:29; Mk. 1:40; para means "with/beside/alongside"; and kaleo means "to call"; so the word is a combination of those two meanings with much nuance.

Exhortation for people like Shawn White can help them reach for their best. But for others exhortation is needed to keep them from disastrous life choices. Think about Morninghawk "who left Christianity to join the Wicca religion. Morninghawk Apollo (who renamed himself as is common in Wiccan practice) discussed his rejection of Christianity with candor. "Ultimately why I left is that the Christian God demands that you submit to his will. In Wicca, it's just the other way around. Your will

is paramount. We believe in gods and goddesses, but the deities we choose to serve are based on our wills." *Drew Dyck, "The Leavers," Christianity Today (November, 2010), p. 43; excerpted from [Generation Ex-Christian](#) (Moody, 2010. [And lead their followers into eternal darkness and an evil that enslaves them.]*

Or Susan from the Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. One father writes of reading the Narnia series with his daughter. When they got to the last book, the Last Battle, she asked, 'Where's Susan?' Susan is the child queen who helped her siblings save Narnia from the White Witch in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. However, she is conspicuously absent at the end in an early scene that includes every character who traveled to Narnia as a child.

Rogers writes:

Although I've read The Chronicles of Narnia dozens of times since I was a boy, Susan's tragic end gets me every time. The book eventually reveals that Susan grows up and outgrows her love for Narnia. Her brother Peter says gravely, 'My sister Susan,' is no longer a friend of Narnia.' 'Yes,' said Eustace, 'and whenever you've tried to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says, 'What wonderful memories you have! Fancy your still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children.'" Susan thought she had become too grown up for thoughts of a great king like Aslan and a blessed land like Narnia and, though she had once experienced it, she left it behind. *Joshua Rogers, "The Overlooked Hope for Narnia's Susan Pevensie," Christianity Today (3-17-16)*

Hebrews 3:13 shows why exhortation is so sorely needed today: *Exhort one another daily as long as it is today so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

**Why do we need this?** Three reasons. First, "the trouble with trouble is that it usually starts out as a whole lot of fun." *Anonymous. Leadership, Vol. 16, no. 4.* Then we rationalize as we continue in it and know it is wrong.

Second, is the nature of sin itself. Jeremiah 17:9 says "*The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.*" We rationalize, we turn a blind eye, we become susceptible to a hardened heart.

A graphic illustration of that blindness is in this story of a blind woman and her seeing eye dog. A man writes:

"One day during my morning run I noticed a blind woman walking on the other side of the street with her Seeing Eye dog, a beautiful golden retriever. As I was about to pass them, I noticed a car blocking a driveway a few paces ahead of them. At that moment the dog paused and gently pressed his shoulder against the woman's leg, signaling her to turn aside so they could get around the car. I'm sure she normally followed his lead, but that day she didn't seem to trust him. She had probably walked this route many times before and knew this was not the normal place to make a turn. Whatever the cause, she wouldn't move to the side and instead gave him the signal to move ahead. He again pressed his shoulder against her leg, trying to guide her on a safe path. She angrily ordered [the dog] to go forward. When he again declined, her temper flared. I was about to speak up ... when the dog once more put his shoulder gently against her leg. Sure enough, she kicked him .... And then she impulsively stepped forward—and bumped square into the car. Reaching out to feel the shape in front of her, she immediately realized what had happened. Dropping to her knees, she threw her arms around the dog, and spoke sobbing words into his ear." *Ken Sande, [Resolving Everyday Conflict](#) (Baker Books, 2011), pp. 99-100* How sad when we think we are right and others who know better, even a seeing eye dog, knows we are wrong and tries to correct us.

In Hebrews 10:23-24 the writer exhorts the believers *NOT to give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but to encourage and exhort each other daily.* We are to help each other "see" and deal with our blind spots, but you can't do that if you are not involved in Christian community.

So what would you do if you met someone who had an experience like the famous historian Kenneth Clark, “one of Great Britain's most prominent art historians and authors, and the producer of the BBC television series Civilization. In an autobiographical account, Clark writes that when he was living in a villa in France he had a ‘religious experience. It took place in the church of San Lorenzo...For a few minutes, my whole being was radiated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had ever experienced before. This state of mind lasted for several minutes ... but wonderful as it was, [it] posed an awkward problem in terms of action. My life was far from blameless. I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all, it was a delusion, for I was in every way unworthy of such a flood of grace. Gradually the effect wore off and I made no effort to retain it. I think I was right. I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course. But I had “felt the finger of God” quite sure and, although the memory of this experience has faded, it still helps me to understand the joys of the saints.’ *Tim Keller, Making Sense of God (Viking, 2016), pages 18-19*)

An exhorter who was a friend would listen to Clark’s description of his incident and then begin asking pertinent questions that would challenge his sense of unworthiness, his resistance to change, and his understanding of God and grace. Jesus is the One who makes us worthy and empowers us to follow Him and be transformed. It isn’t a matter of a person “having to reform.” But it is a matter of responding to the God reveals Himself in love in so many strong ways.

The verbs of exhortation explain what this daily ministry looks like: motivate, challenge, evoke, envision, incite, entreat (advise earnestly, urge strongly, spur on).

In counseling one technique using these verbs is called Motivational Interviewing. It has 4 components: partnership, acceptance, compassion and evoking. Evoking is the exhortation piece in that process - helping the client see the change that’s needed and motivating them to make that change. This approach is different from confrontation, or an effort to educate the client with outside resources or using one’s authority to push for change. Christian evoking is embedded within the foundation of love and Spirit-led discernment.

So what could this look like in our churches today? John Wesley’s movement changed England because of how exhortation worked in his new communities of faith:

“People met together in little communities to help hold each other accountable for their deepest values and most important decisions. Wesley had a beautiful phrase for this: he called it watching over one another in love.

Before someone entered into this community, they would be asked a series of questions to see if they were serious about living in mutual accountability: Does any sin, inward or outward, have dominion over you?

· Do you desire to be told of your faults?...

· Consider! Do you desire that we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear concerning you?

· Do you desire that in doing this we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?

· Is it your desire and design to be on this and all other occasions entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart, without exception, without disguise, and without reserve? (*John Ortberg, Everybody's Normal 'Till You Get to Know Them (Zondervan, 2003)*).

Exhortation is needed to enable a group of people to do what none of them could do alone. That’s the story of the 9 miners trapped for three days 240 feet underground in a water-filled mine shaft. They “decided early on they were either going to live or die as a group.”

The water was 55 degree (Fahrenheit) and threatened to kill them slowly by hypothermia, so...’When one would get cold, the other eight would huddle around the person and warm that person, and when another person got cold, the favor was returned.’ Everybody had strong moments,’ miner Harry B. Mayhugh told reporters after being released from Somerset Hospital in Somerset. ‘But any

certain time maybe one guy got down, and then the rest pulled together. And then that guy would get back up, and maybe someone else would feel a little weaker, but it was a team effort. That's the only way it could have been." [They exhorted each other to hang on, to stay together, to not give up.] They faced incredibly hostile conditions together and they all came out alive together." *Bill White, Paramount, California; source: adapted from "Teamwork Helped Miners Survive Underground," CNN.com (7-28-02)*

Exhortation certainly includes encouragement – the “you can do it” courage messages we need to give each other. But it also includes holding others to the highest when they want to give up. It is *spurring them on*, according to Hebrews 10:23, *to love and good deeds*. How many of you have ever ridden horseback? If a rider has spurs on his/her boots and applies pressure on the side of the horse with those spurs, it will get the horse moving in a new way. An interesting analogy for this gift in community.



Amy Carmichael has been a major exhorter in my life who has spurred me on to follow hard after God. She wrote this little poem about our human dilemma when exhortation is definitely needed:

“A centipede was happy till one day a toad in fun said,  
‘Pray, which leg goes after which?’

Which distracted his mind to such a pitch  
he lay distracted in the ditch considering how to run.”

When someone gets into that self-absorbed introspective state we need to give them a high vision:

“Make us thy mountaineers,  
that undefeated we may climb the hill  
as seeing Him who is invisible” ((Amy Carmichael *Edges of his Ways*, pp. 59, 70).

In the spirit of that mountaineer, she wrote this poem, which I have held before me throughout my life and ministry: “From prayer that asks that I may be  
Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee,  
From fearing when I should aspire,  
From faltering when I should climb higher,  
From silken self, O Captain, free  
Thy soldier who would follow Thee.

From subtle love of softening things,  
From easy choices, weakenings,  
(Not thus are spirits fortified  
Noit this way went the Crucified)  
From all that dims Thy Calvary,  
O Lamb of God, deliver me.

Give me the love that leads the way  
The faith that nothing can dismay  
The hope no disappointments tire,  
The passion that will burn like fire.  
Let me not sink to be a clod  
Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God.”

(Amy Carmichael, *Gold Cord*)

My prayer at New Hope is that we will hold each other to the highest “with the love that leads the way, the faith that nothing can dismay, the hope no disappointments tire and the passion [for God] that will burn like fire.” All for Jesus and His kingdom’s sake. Amen.