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Sermon Notes

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Christ Exposes Prideful Spiritual Leaders

Matthew 23:1-12

I. Tragic History of Arrogant, Selfish Spiritual Leaders

A. In the Bible

Ezekiel 34:2-4 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?' ³ You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

Jesus warns again and again against false spiritual leaders

Matthew 7:15-16 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them.

The Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders about the same thing:

Acts 20:29-31 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard!

So also the Apostle Peter:

2 Peter 2:1-3 But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them-- bringing swift destruction on themselves. ² Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. ³ In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up.

B. In Church History

1. In the Roman Catholic church

After the conversion of Constantine, the church began to take on an institutional feel patterned after the Roman Empire itself; over time, the bishop of Rome, called "The Pope" rose to assert his supremacy over all other Christians and over the world itself

The culmination of this doctrine of papal supremacy came on November 18, 1302, when the Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull in which he argued that the whole world must submit to his authority:

we declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff

Medieval Catholicism: During the last half of the Fifteenth Century the papacy plunged into its darkest period since the Tenth Century. Popes were politically ambitious and, it seems sought for nothing more than the advancement of themselves and their relatives. Some were grossly immoral, flagrantly maintaining mistresses and displaying their illegitimate children. The papacy was procured by bribery. The papal court could rival that of any temporal ruler in its extravagance and luxury. In order to maintain such a court the popes taxed heavily and even sold ecclesiastical offices

- Pope Julius II, a medieval Emperor riding through the streets of Rome in shining armor

Giuliano della Rovere was elected Pope on November 1, 1503

He fought and intrigued like a worldly prince and was famous for his long and bloody wars. He was constantly in the field leading his army, firmly convinced of the rightness of his frightful battles. He led his Catholic troops into combat dressed in full armor and at one stage was almost captured

One historian of that time remarked that Julius II had nothing of the priest but the name, writing that he was "...a soldier in a cassock; he drank and swore heavily as he led his troops; he was willful, coarse, bad-tempered and difficult to manage. He would ride his horse up the Lateran stairs to his papal bedroom and tether it at the door"

He is acknowledged to have had three or five children while he was a cardinal and was confidently accused by the leading nobles of Rome of unnatural vices

The pope advised his secretary to take three mistresses at one time, "in memory of the Holy Trinity", and frankly admitted that he loved the title "Warrior of Rome" applied to him by the populace

In the summer of 1508, Julius commissioned Michelangelo to create an array of works for the Vatican. Michelangelo subsequently carved a marble statue of him, and Julius II examined it with a puzzled expression, asking, "What is that under my arm?" "A Bible, your Holiness," replied Michelangelo. "What do I know of Bibles?" roared the Pope; "I am a warlord; give me a sword instead"

C. In Our Present Day

- Ministry leaders with private jets and lavish lifestyles

In 2008, World Magazine did an expose on six televangelists whose ministries had invested in private jets

Fred Price, Creflo Dollar, Jesse Duplantis, Benny Hinn, and Kenneth Copeland. Their organizations are among more than 30 churches and Christian ministries with luxury jets

The flight records of Jesse Duplantis allow a glimpse into this jet-setting ministry world. The Louisiana-based televangelist has a shock of silvery-white hair, a Cajun accent, and an exuberant style—in his youth he was a guitarist in heavy metal rock bands—has been preaching since the late 1970s. His current vehicle of choice is a Falcon 50, the only plane in its class with three jet engines.

The Falcon 50 is considered a "super-medium" or "long-range" plane, one able to go almost 3,000 miles between refuelings. When Duplantis bought the plane in 2006, he wrote in his ministry's magazine that it was an "amazing tool for world evangelism."

Used "entry level" jets can be found for less than \$2 million, while new top-end jets can sell for more than \$50 million.

The "fully loaded" costs for these jets (including insurance and depreciation) can easily go over \$10,000 per hour, and even for the low-end jets are almost never less than \$2,000 per hour. For most owners, that translates to a cost of several million dollars a year, even with minimal usage.

When Jesus first sent out the Twelve Apostles, he said

Matthew 10:9-10 Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; ¹⁰ take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep.

- Run of the Mill Pride in Spiritual Leaders
 - Pastors can get addicted to “pastoral perks”
 - Most pastors get encouraged by their congregations, “That was a wonderful sermon” etc. Pastors can get addicted to the praise and start living for it and measuring their effectiveness by human means

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, spoke of how pastors can unwittingly be “storing up treasure on earth”:

Our Lord's injunction means avoiding anything that centers on this world only. . . . It applies to people who, though they may not be interested in wealth or money at all, are yet interested in other things which are entirely worldly in the

last analysis. . . . They cannot be tempted by money, but they can be tempted by status and position. . . . Promotion has done endless harm in the Church of God to men who have been quite honest and sincere, but who have not been on guard against this danger. They have been laying up treasures on earth without knowing it. Their interest has suddenly been moved from that one centre of pleasing God and working for His honor and His glory, and has turned, almost without knowing it, to themselves and their own engagement in the work.

In such ways a man can be laying up treasures on earth, and it is so subtle that even good people can be a man's greatest enemy. Many a preacher has been ruined by his congregation. Their praise, their encouragement of him as a man, has almost ruined him as a messenger of God, and he has become guilty of laying up treasures on earth. He tends almost unconsciously to be controlled by the desire to have his people's good opinion and praise, and the moment that happens a man is laying up treasures on earth [*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Section II, p. 82]

- Pastors can start living for material benefits to ministry... the “Pastoral Parking Space” in the lot, the titles of honor, [in the past Anglican churches use “Right Reverend” and other honorifics
- Deeper issues of pride in spiritual leaders: demanding more and more control in church issues, disdaining people who don't have their level of biblical knowledge, playing the power game in the church

For all these reasons, Jesus Christ spends His final public sermon in Matthew's Gospel, not on a salvation theme, but on this sober warning against false spiritual leaders, whose arrogance severely damages the people of God

D. Context: Christ and His Enemies

1. The “Scribes and Pharisees” are the focus of this overpowering diatribe by Jesus
2. Who were they?
 - a. The Pharisees were a sect of the Jews who were extremely conscientious about keeping every detail of the Law
 - b. The “scribes” were responsible to copy the Law of Moses by hand
 - i) They would stand at desks for hours and copy the Scriptures, letter after letter, line after line

- ii) They knew the letter of the Law literally backwards and forwards... they counted the letters in a book they were copying, and knew the middle letter of that book; they would count the letters from the front of the book and from the back and had to arrive perfectly at the middle letter
- c. They were trained for several years at the foot of an established scholar in Israel and would become scholars themselves
- d. Ezra...the quintessential Scribe

Ezra 7:10 Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

In Nehemiah 8, Ezra faithfully instructed the Jews who had returned from exile in one amazing day of Bible teaching

So, at their best, the Scribes could have been a tremendous blessing to Israel

The problem came when they became arrogant and selfish and thought they were righteous just because they knew more of the Bible than anyone else

Worst of all, they rejected the Christ who was the CENTER of the Scriptures:

John 5:39-40 You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

II. Christ Exposes False Spiritual Leaders

A. False Spiritual Leaders Lack Genuine Authority

1. Literally “they have seated themselves in Moses’ seat”

GOD NEVER CALLED THEM TO THIS POSITION

- a. They claim to speak for Moses, and they do not

“Who died and made you boss?”

John MacArthur: “False leaders... lack divine authority in what they say and do. They are self-appointed ministers of human ideas and traditions, and as they promote their false notions, they obscure God’s truth and pervert God’s righteousness for their own selfish reasons.” [Commentary on Matthew 23:3]

1. It seems possible Jesus is speaking with bitter sarcasm when He says

Matthew 23:2-3 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must obey them and do everything they tell you.

2. This may be the only way to make sense of all that Jesus has said about the Pharisees and Scribes in other places, and the missile launch He's about to throw at them in this chapter

In Matthew 15, speaking directly of the Scribes and Pharisees:

Matthew 15:7-9 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ⁸ "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

- a. But I actually think He is saying that, insofar as they rightly teach Moses' Laws, you ought to follow them
- b. But He immediately limits that by exposing their hypocrisy

B. False Spiritual Leaders Lack Integrity (vs. 3)

"...but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach"

1. The Scribes and Pharisees here are exposed not for false teaching but for false LIVING
2. Jesus will call them "hypocrites" seven times in this one chapter alone!
 - a. A hypocrite is an actor, someone who falsely presents themselves to be something they are not
3. They do not "practice what they preach"...

Romans 2:21-23 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

4. Those in spiritual authority over God's people MUST teach rightly and live rightly

1 Timothy 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely.

C. False Spiritual Leaders Lack Compassion (vs. 4)

Matthew 23:4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

1. Here the Scribes and Pharisees are exposed as cold, uncaring, unfeeling people
 - a. This is a direct corollary of spiritual pride... they see themselves as spiritual superior to everyone, and have no sympathy for those underneath them

- b. But truly converted people recognize one simple fact: I deserve eternity in hell for my sin, and if I am in the end saved, it will only be because God lavished grace on me!
 - c. Such a person is a “spiritual beggar” (Matthew 5:3) and thus will not be arrogant toward other beggars
 - d. Furthermore, they will feel deeply the brokenness of other sinners, and desire to help them
2. “Tie up heavy loads” = binding the conscience with laws no one can keep
- a. The Pharisees religion was a relentless machine... absolutely relentless!!
 - b. Day after day they commanded the people to keep all the minutiae of the Law of Moses, including tithing mint leaves
 - c. Salvation by works is a burden NO ONE CAN CARRY but a hypocrite, who claims to be keeping all the regulations perfectly
 - d. Later false teachers would make strict moral laws
 - i) They would forbid marriage AND forbid sexual immorality (like Roman Catholic monasteries and convents)
 - ii) Some false teachers would enslave people to financial calls for generosity, relentlessly using guilt manipulation to pry more money out of people
 - iii) Some “soul-winning” type churches relentlessly drive people in the area of evangelism, as though we are only saved ourselves by how many people we can bring with us
3. They themselves will not lift a finger to help them
- a. Cold, unfeeling, judgmental... they stand over the helpless sinners with NO REMEDY AT ALL for their sin
 - b. They readily consign them to the wrath of God
4. HOW DIFFERENT IS JESUS!!!!
- Matthew 11:28-30 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."***
5. How different was the Apostle Paul

1 Thessalonians 2:7 but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.

1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

D. False Spiritual Leaders Lack Faith (vs. 5)

Matthew 23:5 "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long

1. What a damning statement: "Everything they do is done for men to see..."
 - a. They really lack FAITH, the ability to live for an invisible God, and His future praise
 - b. Only by faith can anyone live free from earthly praise, free from earthly success
2. They lack a genuine desire to please God, to live for God, to love God, to store up treasure with God
3. They are spiritual Easu's, living for THIS LIFE, THIS WORLD
4. This is especially true on the issue of seeking PRAISE FROM MEN, and NOT PRAISE FROM GOD
5. Religiosity is the badge by which they expect to be praised by men
 - a. Phylacteries were small square boxes made of leather from a ceremonially clean animal
 - b. After being dyed black, the leather was sewn into a box using twelve stitches, each stitch representing one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel
 - c. Placed into each phylactery were copies of Exodus 13:1-10 and 11-16 (the Passover Regulations) and Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 (the Shema and the reward list, blessings for obedience... each of those four passages stated something like this:

Deuteronomy 11:18 Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

- d. The Pharisees took that literally
- e. They tied the box to their foreheads by means of leather straps, and wrapped those straps around their arms and hands

- f. BUT they also made them as wide as possible, so that the human audience would not fail to see them
6. The tassels on the garments were commanded in Numbers 15 as reminders to remember all the commands of God
 7. They were to be a constant reminder for the people of God... so also the phylacteries... but these hypocrites did it for MEN to see... "Look at me!! Look how holy I am!! Look how righteous!!!"
 8. Consistently in Scripture, praise from men is pitted against praise from God, as if you CAN'T have both

John 5:44 How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?

John 12:42-43 Many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

Romans 2:28-29 A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God

9. Paul rejected living for praise from men... that had been his outstanding goal during his days as a Pharisee... but he learned to seek only praise from God

Galatians 1:10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 2:6 We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

1 Corinthians 4:3-4 I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

10. Christ commanded a secret religion in which the only audience was GOD

Matthew 6:5-6 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

E. False Spiritual Leaders Lack Humility (vs. 6-7)

Matthew 23:6-7 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'

1. Pride reeks from everything about them... their one thought is for themselves... they are the center of all their thoughts
2. Part of that is SOCIETAL RECOGNITION... places of honor, seats of honor, greetings of honor, titles of honor
3. Place of honor at banquets: like the “head table” at a wedding, there would be a pecking order at their banquets... they were happy to sit in those seats of honor and secretly gloated in their prestige
4. Seats of honor at the synagogues: as in most churches today, synagogues typically had a raised platform in front where the leaders would be seated; visiting rabbis and dignitaries would be asked to participate by reading Scripture; these hypocrites delighted in these ceremonies and privileges
5. Greetings in the marketplace: out in public, even away from the synagogue, they would delight in the honor that came with their office; their heart attitude is the focus here: they LOVED this,
6. To have men call them RABBI, a title of honor: “Supreme one, excellency, most knowledgeable one, great one” etc.

Illus. One rabbi insisted that he be buried in white garments, because he wanted the world to know how he would appear before God!!!

7. Rabbinical writings laid out a whole system of protocols on how common people should address exalted rabbis
8. According to one passage in the Talmud (the Jewish commentaries on Scripture), it was considered more punishable to act against the words of the Scribes than against the words of Scripture
9. Christ commanded humility above all else

Luke 14:8-11 "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹ If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

III. Christ Commands Humility from His Leaders

A. Reject Prideful Titles (vs. 8-10)

Matthew 23:8-10 "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ.

1. There's Only One True Master... Christ
 - a. Don't ACCEPT exalted titles from others... urge people to see you as you really are, a sinner saved by grace
 - b. The essential equality of all believers is taught here
 - c. In our standing before God we are all BROTHERS... complete equals, spiritual beggars who have been invited to a royal banquet
2. There's Only One True Father... God
 - a. Don't exalt someone else in your own mind
 - b. Don't think of them as if they were more important than God
 - c. The gap between ALL humans and God is infinite
 - d. Which is closer to the sun... a man 6 feet tall or a man 6 feet, one inch tall?
Answer: it is a ridiculous question... the sun is 93 million miles away from BOTH
3. There's Only One True Teacher... Christ
 - a. Again, the issue here is human pride, human exaltation
 - b. God has given to some people the role of teacher, and it is not wrong to be called a teacher

2 Timothy 1:11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.

- c. But Christ is again looking into the heart, its motives, its goals and aspirations, its pride
- d. There is not a single bible teacher in the world worth anything who is not really taught by Christ first... he is merely a table waiter, bringing meals to the people of God cooked by the Master Chef, Christ

B. Remember the Lessons on Greatness

Matthew 23:11 The greatest among you will be your servant.

1. These false spiritual leaders measured greatness by earthly standards
2. Jesus here reminds His own followers concerning true greatness
3. The lesson was captured earlier in Matthew 20, and it bears constant reminders

James and John had asked to sit at Jesus' right and left hands in the Kingdom:

Matthew 20:25-28 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

4. WHO IS THE GREATEST??? It is not the biggest, or smartest, or most successful, or most acclaimed, or most famous, or most anything... it is the most HUMBLE, the LOWLIEST SERVANT who is the greatest
5. The church deeply needs its leaders to believe this and live it out... the church needs leaders who see themselves as the servants of all

C. Fear the Humbling God Threatens

Matthew 23:12 For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

1. People who tout themselves, push themselves forward, proclaim their own achievements, those people God will humble
2. That humbling should be terrifying to all spiritual leaders... for God has the power to abase ANY arrogant man anytime

D. Desire the Exaltation God Promises

1. Conversely every spiritual leader should deeply yearn for the praise that God will give on Judgment Day
2. That is the only accolade that really matters

Well done, good and faithful servant.

IV. The Consistent Remedy for Pride: Godward Focus

A. CJ Mahaney's Definition of Humility

1. ***"Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God's holiness."***

2. If anyone is struggling with pride, all we need do is take our sinful selves into the presence of the radiantly holy, perfectly good, infinitely mighty God of the Universe... have His holy eyes search your divided and changeful heart, have His perfect knowledge remind you of all that He's forgiven in your case... and little by little your pride will shrivel and die
3. Go back into the Scriptures and see the greatness of God
 - a. The God who created the heavens and the earth in six days by the word of His power
 - i) Who spoke "Let there be light" and there was light
 - ii) Who crafted the sky, the sea and the dry land
 - iii) Who made the earth come alive with vegetation of astonishing variety
 - iv) Who created the sun, the moon, and the stars
 - v) Who made the water teem with fish and the filled the air with birds
 - vi) Who made all the land animals
 - vii) Who crafted a man and woman in His image—the man from the dust of the earth, the woman from the man's rib

WHERE IS YOUR PRIDE NOW??

This is the precise way that God humbled Job

- b. Or look at God's achievements in Redemptive History
 - i) How God destroyed the entire world with a flood, but rescued Noah and his family
 - ii) How God called Abraham to follow Him, and gave he and Sarah a miracle baby, Isaac, in their old age
 - iii) How God rescued the Jews from slavery in Egypt with ten plagues, and with the overpowering Red Sea crossing
 - iv) How God did miracles again and again to establish Israel in the Promised Land, and to deliver them from their enemies
 - v) How God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, born of a virgin
 - vi) How Christ did astonishingly great miracles: the feeding of 5000 men plus women and children with five loaves and two fish; how He

healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, stilled the storm, and raised Lazarus from the grave after four days

vii) How Christ atoned for the sins of all of God's people from all eras of human history in one afternoon

viii) How Christ was raised from the dead on the third day

ix) How Christ ascended to heaven and now sits on the right hand of God Almighty to rule the universe

WHERE IS YOUR PRIDE NOW???

B. John Calvin on a Humbling Vision of God

John Calvin: "It is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself."

C. Marks of Humility in Spiritual Leaders

1. 19th century Scottish preacher Andrew Bonar said he knew a Christian was growing when he talked more of Christ than he did of himself; according to Bonar, the maturing Christian sees himself growing smaller and smaller until, like the morning star he gives way to the rising sun
2. True spiritual leaders will
 - a. Shun accolades
 - b. Do menial tasks of ministry
 - c. Preach and teach unpopular doctrines
 - d. Do so with humility and brokenness, not arrogance and triumphalism
 - e. Persevere in difficult ministries despite apparent lack of worldly success
 - f. Speak in humble words and humble tones, praising others and making little of themselves
 - g. Be good listeners
 - h. Be prayer warriors

D. Disciplines of Humility

Thomas Shepherd, founder and first president of Harvard University, wrote in his diary for November 10, 1642: “Today I kept a private fast to see the full glory of the gospel and to seek the conquest of the remaining pride in my heart.”

V. Applications

A. Pray for Your Elders

1. Pray that we will develop this kind of humility
2. Pray that we will seek true humility and servant hearts, not merely the appearance of such
3. Pray that we will lose the fear of man and the yearning for human praise
4. Pray that we will live toward God and God alone
5. Pray that we will spend time humbling ourselves in the presence of God

B. Pray all these same things for yourselves

C. Don't Corrupt Your Elders by Fawning Praise, but Encourage them with genuine biblical encouragements