

Comforting God's People

"These are the only Jews among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me."

Colossians 4:11 (NIV)

One of the most needed yet rare ministries in the church today is the ministry of comfort. To comfort means to give strength and hope and to ease the pain of suffering. People who know how to perform this work are precious in the church of Jesus Christ.

The term for "comfort" in Colossians 4:11 is only found here in all of the New Testament. It is used in medical contexts and means to alleviate pain. Paul had suffered greatly for the sake of the work of the Saviour. He seems glad to talk about a number of men who "alleviated the pain" he was enduring for the sake of the Gospel.

It is wonderful that among the men Paul names who comforted him was Mark, the cousin of Barnabas and the man who, in his youth, was an annoyance to Paul. Through the patient work of Barnabas, Mark had grown into a tender hearted and gentle comfort to those who were in any form of suffering and pain.

But how does a person go about becoming a comfort to people? One of the most important characteristics of such a person is the ability to listen first and talk second. When our Lord met Cleophas and his companion on the day He rose from the dead, they were prevented from recognizing Him.

Jesus knew exactly what their problem was and how to cure it. However, instead of barging in and offering truly good advice, He asked them to tell Him all about their pain and confusion. This is the first thing in offering comfort. Ask the person to describe to you what is the matter, and how it came upon them.

Second, agree with them that the issue deserves to be considered a great difficulty. Never minimize what the person is experiencing. Probably you should tell them you have no idea of the sorrow they are facing. Those who are more of a hindrance than a help will often say something foolish like, "I know exactly how you feel."

Then, after the person has exhausted themselves telling you about what is the matter, gently begin to offer hope and comfort. You start with some information from Scripture that they can use to anchor themselves. It might be a promise of God's grace and help. Or, it could be relating a similar situation that happened in biblical times. You might point out to the person how the Lord helped someone with a similar issue.

Whatever you do—listen first. Let the person speak as long as they wish. Then ask permission to speak to the matter. Be sure you bring the light of God's Word to the difficulty. Leave the person with a promise that they can plead before the Lord. This is how real comfort comes. Listen much and speak little, and you will not fail to comfort.

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