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Encouraging One Another

Encouraging one another is so important whether you're talking about a family, a person, a ministry, or a church. The real question is what role are we playing, building up or tearing down?

Our launching pad today is 1 Thessalonians 5:11. It's a launching pad because it's just one of several verses in the New Testament where we're commanded to encourage one another. Paul wrote to that church stating, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are now doing."

Biblical encouragement can be examined by five questions.

1. What are we talking about when we talk about encouragement?

Most people associate encouragement with flattery or compliments or trite little expressions like: "Oh you look nice today" or "Have a nice day," or "Take care." That's not what encouragement is. Those expressions are fine, nothing wrong with them, but they are not Biblical encouragement.

Encouragement means to put courage in. Isn't that a great concept? I encourage a fellow human being when I instill in his or her heart courage to face the world, that's encouragement. The Greek root word translated encourage in our New Testament is *paracollatos*, the verb form of the noun, *paraclete*. *Paraclete* which means to lay alongside. Jesus said there will be a comforter. Some translations use the word "encourager" who will come alongside you for the purpose of building up your life. (John 14) He was referring, of course, to the coming of the Holy Spirit, and that is exactly what the Spirit does. His Spirit lays alongside our Spirit to encourage us.

Paracollatos is used 109 times in the New Testament. Most of the time it's translated encourage, sometimes exhort, sometimes comfort, but put all together you get the biblical idea of encouragement. One man's definition says, "Encouragement is the expression to help someone become a better Christian when life is rough." That's what encouragement is; that's putting courage in the heart.

Focus more on affirmation than appreciation. That may seem like a subtle difference to you, but it's really pretty major. Appreciation is usually for what somebody has done, it's performance based. I appreciate you for what you did, your accomplishments. There's nothing wrong with appreciation, but affirmation is more valuable. I appreciate you rather than something you've done for me. When we affirm, we encourage.

2. Who is responsible for the ministry of encouragement?

- a. Preachers—"We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in the faith." (1 Thessalonians 3:2)
- b. Teachers—Those who were teaching went everywhere encouraging the brethren. (Acts 15) You see encouragement is a vital part of preaching and teaching. I try never to construct a lesson by God's guidance without including in it elements of encouragement even if it's a lesson that may sting because it may rebuke us for our sin. But at the same time, we need to be built up to have the courage to live the way God wants us to live.
- c. Elders, pastors, overseers and bishops—Titus 1 is a chapter that lists a criteria for elders, the kind of people they need to be. "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." (Titus 1:9) Elders are to be men who know the truth, and who handle the truth rightly so that people are built up. That is extremely important. I have found invariably that churches that have leaders whose members do not respect them are discouraged

churches. The converse of that is true; churches that have leadership they do respect are inevitably encouraged churches. It is incumbent upon elders to be encouragers.

- d. Those who are gifted to encourage. Romans 12:5-8 lists areas of spiritual giftedness. As you go down through the list, one of those gifts is encouragement. Notice the gift of encouragement is listed separately from the gift of teaching. In other words, teachers are encouragers, but you don't have to be a teacher to be an encourager. There are some people who have been gifted and talented by God to be able to share that buoying spirit in the life of another. One Biblical example is Barnabas but that was not his real name. His real name was Joseph of Cyprus, but they named him Barnabas which means son of encouragement.

We read about Barnabas first in Acts 4, when he went and sold a field, took all the proceeds, and laid it at the apostles' feet. Don't you know that put courage in the apostles' hearts? Then we read in Acts 9 that a fellow by the name of Saul of Tarsus had been persecuting the church. He had been converted, but no one trusted him early on. A fellow by the name of Bar-na-bas, the son of encouragement, went and stood at his side and put courage in his heart. Next, Barnabas goes to help a fledgling Gentile church in Antioch. (Acts 11) Barnabas appears to have been putting courage in somebody else. He had the gift of encouragement.

- e. The entire body ultimately has the responsibility. Sure, not everyone is as gifted as some, but each of us has the responsibility to encourage. "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up." (1 Thessalonians 5:11) That's not addressed to preachers, that's addressed to the entire body. Some parts are better at it than others. But as with our physical bodies all the members of the body come to help that body part in need. The same thing here—the entire spiritual body encourages those members in need. Frankly, it's not healthy for an entire church to be dependent upon a few members to do all the encouraging. You need many, many, many people building up what a few are constantly trying to tear down. So we're all in this ministry of encouragement.

3. When do we encourage?

- a. Encourage when assemblies together. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:24-25) That says very clearly that the primary reason Christians assemble is to encourage.

All my life I've heard and read Hebrews 10:24-25 from the old King James Bible, "Forsake not the assembly." I've heard it always in the context you come to church meaning assemble together. But I seldom heard the next part which was right there in the same verse "so that you can be encouraged and so you can encourage."

"What is it that you can do when you assemble that you can't do at home?" That's a pretty good question because you can do almost everything at home that you can do here. Can you pray at home? Sure. Can you preach? Yes. Can you sing? Sure, you can sing at home. What about the Lord's Supper? Sure. The Lord's Supper is taken to shut-ins and to people in the hospitals. You can do almost any part of what you do at church—you can give at home. So—what is it that you can do when assembled together that you can't do at home? You can encourage each other. You can't do that at home. You can't do that isolated from other Christians.

Now here is a question: Which would be more wrong? Not to assemble, or not to do what God says to do when you assemble? That's a pretty good question. Some Christians have an idea that you come, sit, listen and leave. "Whew, that's that, I've got that done for a week." They miss the command that we're here to encourage one another. I hope you assemble with a mindset of where's a brother or sister that I can build

up today. Yes, we can do that when we sing to each other, and when we pray for each other. But we primarily do it one-on-one when we look at each other, love each other, shake hands, hug one another, and when our conversations go beyond, "Sure is raining outside, isn't it?" We gather together to build each other up. We encourage at every assembly.

- b. Encourage at every opportunity. It's not just when we assemble. "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." (Hebrews 3:12-13) That clearly says our responsibility to encourage one another is ever present. We are to encourage one another daily. By the way, that word has significant implications of what kind of body relationship we're supposed to have. We're supposed to encourage one another daily, but some of us don't even have contact weekly.

Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I'm not suggesting that this week, everybody call everybody else. Let me give you the illustration; take the physical body analogy again. You see, no member of my body is directly connected to every other member of the body. My foot is not touching my hand; at least by the way they are aligned in the body. No cell in my body is touching every other cell. But, every cell in my body is touching at least one other cell. Every member of my body, every appendage, is touching at least one other part of my body, and that's what we need to do. You can't be connected to everybody.

Every Christian cannot be personally connected to every other Christian on a daily basis. That's why it's everybody's responsibility to encourage daily. You need to be connected to somebody, and they need to be connected to you to such a degree that you have virtually daily contact. We need to have brothers and sisters in the Lord who love us and know us, spurring us on every day.

4. Why encourage?

We're talking about really getting into people's lives and building each other up. Why do we do it?

- a. We need to encourage one another because of the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:13) Never underestimate the power of Satan and his determination to discourage us to the point of quitting and turning away from God. Body members severed from the body die. What were to happen if my big toe were cut off from my foot? You know what will happen, it's going to putrefy and decay. The old devil knows that if he can just get a child of God isolated and cut off from circulation, then he will get spiritual gangrene, and he will die.

What temptation is Satan trying to use on you right now? Is he trying to use pride, lust, just old discouragement, fear, uncontrolled anger, doubt, guilt or rebellion? What's he trying to work on you with? Whatever the temptation, his ultimate goal is to pull you away. He is trying to cut you off from Christ's body and the flow of His life-saving blood. The other members of His body are clutching on to you saying, "No, no, don't go. You need to stay, because you've got to be part of the body, and you are important." That's encouragement.

We make a grave mistake when we assume that everybody's spiritual health can be taken for granted. Nobody's spiritual health can be. That's why we need to encourage one another to help overcome the deceitfulness of sin.

- b. The reality of trials and troubles. It's no surprise to you that this world is just filled with suffering, pain, trial and trouble. That's here because we live in a fallen world, but God has allowed it to stay. That gives some people some problems. We can't get off talking about the theology of why there is suffering and pain in our world, but one thing God has made clear. "I've even allowed it to happen so that you will grow through it and understand how badly you need me." But the other part of that is we also learn from our trials and troubles how badly we need each other.

Not very many of us have our lives as neatly ordered as our apparel. There are people who desperately need encouragement. But they'll only take off the veneer, open up and let you know they need encouraging if they really sense that the ministry of encouragement is taken seriously. We need to encourage brothers and sisters because Satan is trying to pick us off one by one.

5. How do we encourage?

It's not simply by little trite expressions or flattery. How do you really encourage one another as long as it's called today?

- a. We remind each other of God's promise. For one example, Paul is writing to a discouraged church. The whole church is worried because they are expecting Jesus to come back any minute. Some of their relatives have already died. They're all sad and saying, "Oh no, they've missed Jesus' coming. They died before He came back." So in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul states these magnificent promises about the coming of Jesus. He said, "Don't worry about the dead; they are the ones who will rise first. Therefore, encourage one another with these words." See, whenever we gather, if someone is vulnerable enough to share with you, don't use trite statements or preach to him, but remind him of God's promises. He has promised to always be with us, hear every prayer we utter, take away our sins if we confess them and lay them before Him, give us strength in time of need, and never allow us to have more put on us that we're able to bear. Those are magnificent promises and when reminded of them you will have the courage to go on.
- b. Granting genuine forgiveness. Paul, when writing to the church in Corinth, said there was a brother who was in some really deliberate and awful sin but he repented and some of them were holding him at arm's length. "Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." (2 Corinthians 2:7) The word comfort is that same Greek word, *paracollatos* that could just as easily be rendered encourage. See, forgiveness has to be visibly extended in order to be received.

I love the story of the fellow who went to the counselor because his marriage was having trouble. The counselor said, "What's the problem?" He said, "Every time we have a fight, my wife gets historical." The counselor said, "You mean hysterical." He said, "No, I mean historical. She brings up every bad thing I've ever done." Now I hope you can't relate to that in your marriage, but some people can. You must forgive to be forgiven.

Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, was a gracious lady, and on one occasion was reminded by a friend of hers of what someone had said about her that was so awful, so slanderous. Miss Barton said, "I don't know what you're talking about." The friend said, "Oh come on, the papers covered it, and everybody was talking about it." She went on three or four minutes. Finally, Clara Barton interrupted and said, "Oh, oh, oh that. I distinctly remember forgetting that." You know we don't really forget, but we can make a conscious choice to not let it affect the way we treat that person or anyone related to it.

Sometimes and in some places, people repent of their sins, but they're made to feel like second-class Christians. You know that's not right. If you do that to someone else, you're not only not encouraging them, you're discouraging them.

Immediately following a list of people of great faith the Hebrews writer states "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." (Hebrews 12:1) That great cloud of witnesses includes Abel, Noah, David, Jephtah, and many others, but it includes all those that are living, too. Let's cheer one another on in that rank.

Several years ago, Peter Uberoth was in town. Do you remember the name, Peter Uberoth? He was major league's baseball commissioner for a while, and he also headed up the 1984 Olympics that were held in

Los Angeles. When he was speaking in Nashville, Uberoth asked, "Do you want me to tell you about the greatest athlete I've ever seen?" Now when you think about a man who has had as much exposure in sports as Uberoth, and he says that, every ear perked up. He said in the '84 Olympics, they had a 20,000 kilometers torch run serpentine all the way through the country. And each participant, if he met the criteria, would run for one kilometer. He would light his little torch from the previous runner, go one kilometer and light the next one. He had to pay \$3,000 for the privilege of doing that. Every bit of the \$3,000 went to charity.

Uberoth said, near the end, everybody was getting discouraged. It looked like costs might go over, you know the deadlines. He said, that to motivate their forces in Los Angeles, what they would do is gather all their workers early in the morning and show news clips of the torch run the day before. It was just encouraging to see everybody cheering. Uberoth said we were in the office about 10:00, late one night, and in comes a volunteer holding a videotape. He said there were only a handful of us there, ready to go home, beat to death, just tired. The volunteer said, "You've got to see this." He said, "Well, what is it?" "It's a videotape of the torch run." He said, "We'll see it in the morning." The volunteer said, "No, you've got to see it now." When they stuck it in, it was a little piece of amateur video.

It showed a narrow little road in New Mexico, and there were people lining each side about five deep. Along comes a runner running with a torch. Then as the runner stops and leans over to light the torch, you can't see the next recipient, it's obviously somebody short. A big burly policeman on a motorcycle is blocking the view. It takes a couple of minutes because apparently the torch is having a hard time being lit and the policeman is looking at his watch and he's obviously frustrated because they're running behind schedule. Finally, the torch is lit and then you see the top of a little blond head starting to move forward.

It's a little girl who is nine and suddenly the video catches her face and there's this bright, beaming, beautiful smile. But a second later, you notice one other thing, she is severely crippled. She can barely put one foot in front of the other. She is barely going. The crowds are beginning to cheer. Uberoth found out later her name was Amy and she had been practicing for one solid year, and the best she had ever gone was half a kilometer. The plan was for her to hand the torch off to an alternate at the half-kilometer mark. It had to be a slight uphill grade. If it was level, she would have fallen over. They picked a special part of the road. She had worked a year with bake sales, raising the \$3,000 for her half-kilometer. When she got to the half-kilometer mark suddenly there was rolled out a huge banner a block long with little pictures all over it and in gigantic letters, "RUN AMY RUN!" Her whole elementary school class was holding the banner and her whole school filled the entire block.

At that moment, she had already transferred the torch to the alternate; she saw that banner and she took it back. She edged forward again until she got to the end of the block and now absolutely exhausted, she started to turn it again and to turn it over, and at that point the whole school dropped the banner and ran out behind her swelling the street like a scene from "Rocky." They began to chant, "Run Amy Run." And she made it to the end of that kilometer and handed the torch. And the next fellow was off like a shot.

The closing scene of that amateur video showed her mother holding up little Amy. But then it turned to that burly policeman, who moments before had been looking at his watch, and his visor was up, and with a handkerchief he was wiping the tears off his face.

See that's really what life is all about. We run as hard as we can carrying the torch of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we want to quit and drop it; sometimes we don't want to go on. But we're here to say to one another, run Steve run. Run Mary run. Don't give up. Amazing Grace #1310, Steve Flatt, April 27, 1997