

# ENCOURAGEMENT

## CELEBRATING EVIDENCES OF GRACE

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One of the most unexamined descriptions of God is found in Romans 15:5, where the One we worship and serve is called “the God of endurance and encouragement.” God is by nature and practice an encourager! He is openhanded with encouragements to us because we need them in order to endure in joyful faithfulness to him. If God as encourager does not fit how we think about his orientation toward us, we will likely fail to value encouragement as God does. We will consider encouragement as a nice bonus we may hand out to fellow-believers at times, but we will not view encouragement as an integral part of what it means to be Christian.

### ***A Pervasive Theme***

The theme of encouragement flows through Scripture because it flows forth from God. When the Lord raised up leaders to serve his people, he called for them to be encouraged (Deut. 3:28, 2 Chr. 35:2). When the church gathers, its members are called to “encourage one another” (1 Thess. 5:11). When Bibles are opened, encouragement is meant to follow (Acts 13:15). Encouragement was one reason why men were sent by the apostles to visit the churches (Eph. 6:22). We are to encourage the “fainthearted” when we encounter them (1 Thess. 5:14). As love grows between us, encouragement should follow (Col. 2:2). And encouragements should commonly be present among those who take Jesus seriously (Phil. 2:1).

So what precisely is this encouragement? There are worldly encouragements that unbelievers give. But true, biblical encouragement is lifting up the saints by holding up Christ and his gospel treasure in order to strengthen them for joyful service to him.

### ***Christ-Centered Encouragement***

We all need Christ-centered encouragement because we all experience opposition to Great-Commandment living. We are continually made aware of our ever-present weakness, and we can be overwhelmed by the task of serving Christ in a world filled with challenges. We are tempted to nod in agreement with Thomas Hobbes’ infamous statement declaring that life is “nasty, brutish and short.”<sup>27</sup> (And you thought it was just you!)

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Routledge: Longman Library of Primary Sources in Philosophy, 2016), 9.

These obstacles to living whole-heartedly for Christ are not impersonal. There is someone actively working against us. His name is Satan, which means the Accuser. He prowls, roars, and devours (1 Pet. 5:8). He sets snares, has schemes, and uses trickery. He is not invincible, but he is persistent. No saint of God is immune to these difficulties. Indeed, each one is tempted to weariness and self-doubt. The most fruitful Christian you know very likely feels as though their life is poorly used and ineffectual on a regular basis.

Christ-centered encouragement is not shelling out shallow coffee mug quotations or positive statements that are meant to move the conversation along to safer and more pleasant territory. It is meant to help fellow believers stand against the effects of the fall, to strengthen them to persist in the call to be salt and light. Biblical encouragers are not blind to the world that Hobbes saw around him. Rather, we see that and more. We see Christ and the need to have our hearts filled with confidence in his hold on our lives. We recognize the types of encouragements that will have a meaningful impact on the hearts of those who prize the Savior.

### ***It's Not Beyond Us***

When we look at the size of people's burdens, we are tempted to think that any encouragement we have to give is too thin to make much difference. This brings us back to the definition of biblical encouragement, lifting up Christ to those who belong to Christ. Pointing to Christ in meaningful ways is never thin because he is wondrous in every way. There is no glimpse of Christ that is thin in glory or void of meaning. As we point to Christ, we can open the vast treasury of his gospel—the glorious realities which make other forms of inspiration look shabby and tarnished. Reminding people about the sustaining and refreshing truths of Christ doesn't require exaggeration or clever word-smithing. We just give the facts—the jaw-dropping facts—of creation, incarnation, crucifixion, redemption, resurrection, justification, reconciliation, adoption, sanctification, consolation, glorification, presentation, and celebration.

Encouragement is enjoyable because it identifies the evidences of grace that are already embedded and flowering in the lives of God's people. Encouragement is not a makeshift attempt to stick Christian slogans onto an otherwise pathetic life. Just the opposite! We encourage believers by identifying what is true in them. We brush off the dust and point to the gem. We give voice to the evidential presence of the Holy Spirit. We acknowledge the vibrant colors of Christ's character. We lay out the manifestations of God's Word that we have observed and experienced. In a very real sense, encouragers are treasure hunters who cry out, "There is Christ! I can see him in you!"

### ***God-Given Means of Encouragement***

The ministry of Scripture is the primary means by which we are meant to bring encouragement. Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." God's Word tells us what the God of our salvation has done, promised, and declared. When we bring biblical truths to weary believers, we bring words of life that were specifically given to revive their soul: words which cannot fail or be improved upon.

Biblical encouragement is not relegated to pastors and teachers. All believers are to utilize the truths of Scripture as instruments of encouragement (1 Thess. 4:18). We all have this Word, true food for our soul, which brings joy amidst our deepest trials and provides certainty in a world that trembles. We don't need to be experts in the nuances of the Bible to know its central message: the gospel. We know the main character to whom all Scripture points: Christ! And we know the purpose of Scripture: to draw us into an ever-deepening relationship with him.

A second means God has given each of us for encouraging one another is our gifting by the Holy Spirit. Consider the definition for spiritual gifts found in 1 Corinthians 12:7, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." And we see the effects of the Spirit's work two chapters later in Paul's repetition of terms for encouraging and building others up (1 Cor. 14:3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 26). The Spirit works through us in ways designed to benefit the other members of our church. All spiritual gifts are Christ-exalting (it is what the Spirit loves to do) and meant for lifting each other's hearts to be Christ-exalting.

As we live dependent upon the Holy Spirit, engaged in meaningful community, the Spirit will draw out of us the means for encouraging one another. As we look for and announce these graces in action, we encourage those who easily miss or minimize those evidences of God at work.

A third means for encouragement is our mutual faith (Rom. 1:12). Becoming citizens of Christ's kingdom makes us strangers and aliens in this world. A significant source of a believer's discouragement comes from the corruption around us and at times in us. But our faith is rooted in the realities of being "more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

We often moan that our faith is weak, not recognizing its actual supernatural nature. Even when our faith falters in a challenging trial or difficult situation, we lean on the truth of God made flesh, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, and the return of Jesus as Judge and King. How can we possibly believe what makes the world snicker? It is because we truly do have supernatural faith! We have enough faith to strengthen those who also believe. And when we see or hear of faith in fellow-believers, we are encouraged in the greater exercise of our own faith. As we speak biblically-authorized and faith-filled words to one another, the soul takes a deep breath that revives our whole being.

### ***The Hindrances We Face***

So why do we miss all these important and Christ-exalting opportunities to be encouragers to those God has given us to encourage? Here are some common reasons:

#### **1. We accommodate prideful thoughts.**

Pride is always a lurking concern. However, when encouragement is focused on God's grace at work in someone, it is more apt to engender humility.

## **2. We see people's flaws more easily, and may find it hard to see evidences of grace in them.**

Remember, the ultimate goal is to exalt Christ. He is worthy of taking the time to look more carefully. Encouragement doesn't have to wait for godly qualities to reach their ripened maturity. In fact, it is a great time to encourage people when areas of growth are still embryonic. The apostle Paul is a great example to us in 1 Corinthians 1. He will soon enough correct this church in matters of significance, yet he doesn't withhold encouragement despite their immaturity.

## **3. We see ourselves as truth-tellers.**

Obviously, truth-telling is a biblical trait. However, pride may be a significant motivation when we see ourselves as sitting in the role of truth-teller to people's sins. 1 Timothy 5:1 urges us to choose encouragement over rebuke. There are times when rebuke is necessary. However, the truth is that every believer has the grace of God in them. And these gospel graces are the greatest truths about them.

## **4. The mind-to-mouth challenge.**

Quite often, I find that I recognize a word, an attitude, or an action that is commendable. And while I take note of it in my mind, I fail to transition what I noticed into words that edify and encourage. So, encourage yourself with the fact that you can strengthen people to serve Christ by sharing what you see of Christ in them.

## **5. If we didn't encourage people in the past, it feels awkward to suddenly start now.**

This is especially true with the people who know us best. Simply be honest and begin your encouragement by saying, "I have not encouraged you much in the past, but it is an area where God is helping me grow." Keep your mind on the prize, which is the wonderful privilege of strengthening people in their faithfulness to God!

## **6. We don't think about it.**

Becoming an encourager is a habit of grace, which means God wants you to grow in it, and the Holy Spirit will enable you to grow in it. Ask God to help you see evidences of grace, and then give you the courage and words to express what you see.

## ***Practical Helps to Grow***

Now that you are (hopefully) eager to be used as an encourager to the saints of God, how should you get started and what should you keep in mind?

Encouragement is not scattering flattery or exaggerated statements on people's lives. It is pointing out the truths about Christ and his gospel that apply to Christians, or that you see at work in them. We are not trying to make people feel better as much as helping them see that Christ is present and faithful.

### **1. Be as specific as possible.**

Rather than telling a volunteer, "Great job today," point out something you noticed and thank them for it. The best encouragements are those that point to the beauty of God at work in specific ways.

### **2. Internalize God's Word.**

Know his attributes and his promises. Fill your heart and mind with meditations that are rich in Christ and his gospel. This will heighten your sensitivity to his influences in people.

### **3. Pay attention to how believers interact with one another.**

Any gathering of the church will present abundant opportunities to see God's grace at work in others. And when you hear of praiseworthy activity in the life of someone you know, mark it down and encourage them with what you learned about God's grace in them.

### **4. Take advantage of the many means we have for sending encouragement.**

In today's culture, cards and letters make an impression. Texts are an easy way to connect with people, and may be a helpful way for those who are too shy to bring up encouragements face to face. However, don't neglect in-person encouragements, especially in those moments when you notice behavior that is particularly worthy of it.

### **5. Review your prayer list and consider who you can reach out to.**

Let them know that you carry them on your heart. Include something of the Lord's faithfulness, and don't forget to point out faithfulness you see in how they carry their burdens.

### **6. Don't wait for big reasons for encouragement.**

Just being consistent in living for Christ is worthy of encouragement. Lift up as much as you can, as often as you can.

### **7. Include encouragements to those you think are mature and don't need it.**

The Accuser may be his most furious in attacking them. Every believer is confronted with reasons for discouragement on a regular basis.

### **8. Be quick to speak up about what God is doing in and around you.**

The enemy whispers that God is not all that active in our lives. We need to counter that treacherous voice by helping each other become aware of the fact that God truly is quite active among us!

Encouragement is not just a nice habit; it is part of your biblical faithfulness. And it is a means by which we can be used by God as he cares for and strengthens his people. Take time to think specifically about who you can encourage and why.

### ***A Final Word***

There are forms of expertise that are beyond our gifting, but encouragement is not one of them. Each of us can become an expert in identifying evidences of grace in other saints. We all splash about in the ocean of God's grace, and the Holy Spirit is a fountain of grace within us. There are plenty of people fulfilling the role of critic, but the stage is wide open for those who would be encouragers. And when it comes to Christ-exalting encouragers, there can never be too many!