

ONE ANOTHER

Cultivating Christ-Centered Community

LESSON TWO



THE FRUIT OF ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER

- It builds up the body of Christ
- It fills the human hunger for blessing
- It gives strength to those who are ready to give up
- It lets others know they are visible, appreciated, and unconditionally loved by God
- It allows a trusted friend to stretch and challenge us
- It reminds us that we are part of something larger than our own independent journey
- It helps us use our gifts for the sake of the kingdom, investing in what lasts
- It enlarges our heart with God's delight for us
- It spreads the delight God has in people throughout our world

ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

“WHEN WE GET TOGETHER, I WANT TO ENCOURAGE YOU IN YOUR FAITH, BUT I ALSO WANT TO BE ENCOURAGED BY YOURS.” (ROMANS 1:12)

Adele Calhoun reminds us that each one of us comes into this world hungry for human welcome, blessing, and encouragement: “We need to hear that we are wanted and valued—that in God’s eyes we are beautifully and wonderfully made. When we are blessed and encouraged, we are better able to internalize our value, worth and dignity.” (*Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, p. 198)

The word “encourage” in our English translations comes from the Greek word *parakaleō*, which literally means “to call to one’s side, encourage, comfort, teach, strengthen, and console.” Most people think that giving encouragement is just saying nice words to uplift someone. However, it’s more than this. Giving encouragement to others not only means to give comfort and support, it also means to strengthen and develop. As we encourage others we are helping them develop a stronger relationship with Christ and mature in faith. Encouragement also instills confidence and courage. It inspires others with God’s own hope, confidence, and delight in them. When spoken at critical moments, words of affirmation are powerful enough to change a person’s life.

Christians need other Christians who will remind them of their identity as ones in whom Christ dwells. Regarding encouragement, Dietrich Bonhoeffer affirms a community’s impact on the individual, saying, “The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged.” We must remember that we continually come in contact with people who are hurting (and perhaps especially during times of global crisis). As we think about what it means to “encourage one another” this week, may we minister grace and healing to one another through the simple but effective gift of encouragement.

ENCOURAGE

“Encourage one other and build each other up, as indeed you are doing” 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:8-14 (see also Philippians 1:3-11; Romans 15:5-6,14; Acts 14:21-22; Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 3:16; 2 Cor 13:11)

The action that Paul most explicitly commends and commands is mutual encouragement, a repeated practical theme of 1 Thessalonians (2:12; 3:2,7; 4:1,10, 18; 5:11,14). What stands out is that the building-up of community in Christ is, for Paul, evidence of holiness of life. Holiness is not an individual endeavor, but a daily practice of building up the people around us. Paul's call to mutual encouragement, comfort, and consolation in 1 Thess 5:11 is not a command to new action. Remarkably, Paul *encourages* the encouragement they are already offering each other, "as indeed you are doing" (5:11). In other words, Paul not only recognizes that encouraging one another actually needs encouragement, but also shows the Thessalonians what this looks like. We are called to many worthwhile endeavors in our lives for the sake of living out God's love for us and for our neighbor. However, it is not often that we issue a call for encouragement and building each other up. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians suggests that as much as faith, love, and hope are observable characteristics of a Christian community, so too is encouragement.

Our community reminds us who we are. They tell the story we need to hear repeatedly. We not only need to be reminded of who we are, but also to be challenged to reflect that identity in our daily lives (see the way Paul encourages the Christians in Philippi in Philippians 1:3-11). This involves encouragement, counsel, and watching over one another in love. An encouraging community creates an ethos in which people are encouraged to engage in specific activities on a regular basis in order to become the people we truly are. I love the way Paul encouraged the Christians at Rome: “I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge, and able to instruct one another” (Rom 15:14). He believed in them and called them to live that out. The community is empowered to tell us who we are and to challenge us as to what we can become.

Encouragement is needed when we begin to lose sight or strength to keep fighting the good fight. We need someone in our corner to strengthen and encourage us, just as Paul and his fellow workers did when they visited the churches Paul had planted: “They returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith” (Acts 14:21-22). In the next chapter, Judas and Silas do the same: “Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers” (Acts 15:32).

There is so much in life that beats us down and discourages us that we need a steady dose of encouragement. We can't do life alone, nor should we try. We're responsible to one another for encouragement and strengthening faith, love, and hope. Others need our support in being Christians, and we need theirs. We need a fellow Christ-follower who is absolutely convinced that we are great and can do great things. We need others who celebrate with us when we succeed and pull us up when we fail. We need others to speak words that are truthful, helpful, positive, and kind. As Paul writes in Ephesians, “Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them” (Eph 4:29).

Encouragement also entails admonishing and watching over one another. To admonish is *to warn, to watch out for, and to offer guidance to one another*. Paul told the Colossians, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” (Col 3:16). When we open our lives to one another, we do so with the expectation that others will watch out for us and offer a word of warning or guidance when needed. Paul told the Thessalonians to treat people in ways that aid their current battle in life: “We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them” (1 Thess 5:14). *Admonish, encourage, help, and be patient* — these are words of community. They are actions that relieve burdens, lift spirits, and strengthen faith. They are the characteristics of a disciple of Jesus, and they are birthed not in isolation, but only in community — on our shared journey with one another.

THREE FORMS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

The following suggestions come from *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People* by Michael Frost (pp. 20-21).

1. **Words of Affirmation:** This is the simplest way to bless someone. Send them a note, write them an email, text them. Send them some words of affirmation and encouragement. Let them know you've noticed something worthwhile about them. Mark Twain once said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment." I've heard it said that a word of encouragement is like oxygen to the soul. Beautiful. A word of affirmation helps our souls to breathe more easily.

Gary Chapman included words of affirmation as one of his five love languages and he describes them as verbal support to communicate love. But he goes further. He identifies the importance of empathy in blessing others with words of affirmation:

"Encouragement requires empathy and seeing the world from [another's] perspective. We must first learn what is important to [the other]. Only then can we give encouragement. With verbal encouragement, we are trying to communicate, 'I know. I care. I am with you. How can I help?' We are trying to show that we believe in another person and their abilities.

2. **Acts of Kindness:** Who doesn't feel blessed when someone does them a favor or provides some kind of practical support? Cutting an older person's lawn. Babysitting an exhausted couple's kids. Helping a neighbor move. These acts of kindness literally add strength to their arm. They lighten the recipient's load.

Look for ways to perform an act of kindness in someone's life. Exercise your soul and bless another person by doing them a good turn this week. It will not only bless your soul, but will also provide practical assistance to another and hopefully, over time, deepen your bonds with each other.



ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

3. **Gifts:** The recipient of a gift thrives on the love, thoughtfulness and effort behind the gift. A gift can show the recipient that they are known, cared for and valued. And I'm not just talking about birthday or Christmas gifts. I mean totally random gift giving. Almost everything ever written on the subject of love indicates that at the heart of love is the spirit of giving.

A gift is a symbol of that thought. Gifts come in all sizes, colors and shapes. Some are expensive, and others are free. Some gifts are given for obvious reasons. A struggling single mother would appreciate a food basket, or the person struggling with some hardship or need would value being cheered up. But some gifts are nothing more than expression that the recipient has been thought of and cared for.

As church members are affirming, gifting and performing acts of kindness for each other, it also means they are propelled outwards to bless unbelievers in these ways. Watch how unleashing a culture of blessing—words of affirmation, acts of kindness, gift giving—binds people to each other. It has the effect of strengthening the Christian community while launching its members more deeply into the lives of outsiders.

When we live unexpected lives (which includes the blessing of strangers), we find ourselves being questioned by others. Then we have best opportunity for sharing the hope of Christ within us.

DISCUSSION

1. Name some great historical teams (perhaps your favorite). This could be sports teams, movie characters, superheroes, etc. In what ways did they encourage one another, complement one another's strengths and weaknesses, and build each other up?
2. Who would you consider to be a great encourager in your life? Why?
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer affirms the community's impact on an individual, saying, "The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged." When have you experienced these moments in your own life and community? Share about a time when you needed encouragement and then about how people did in fact encourage you. What actions and/or words were especially helpful to you?
4. After reading 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14, what is the importance of Paul's multiple commands to encourage in that passage? What would the church be like if we obeyed these commands?
5. Which of the three suggested forms of encouragement on the previous page (words of affirmation, acts of kindness, gifts) mean the most to you when you receive them and why? In which of these ways (or others) do you feel most capable of encouraging others?
6. Is there anyone you know who needs encouragement? Is there one action you can take today to encourage someone? (Class leaders, you might even give your class a minute or two to send a text message or at least set a reminder to do something later in the day)
7. Is there anyone who has encouraged you but you never let them know how thankful you were for it? Reach out to that person and tell them what a difference they made in your life. That will make the encouragement mutual.

"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5-6)