

THE WORK OF ENCOURAGEMENT



ENCOURAGEMENT (5)

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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Work of Encouragement

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *The Work of Encouragement*

At one level, only the Holy Spirit can give us the courage to live exceedingly abundantly beyond where we've ever been with the Lord. At another level, He uses each of us to encourage one another for such a wonderful life.

That means we all need to understand how the work of encouragement proceeds, and to give ourselves to learning and practicing the disciplines of encouragement. This will be the focus of Part 5 of our study of "Encouragement."

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, www.ailbe.org, and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Encourage One Another

He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. 1 Thessalonians 5.24

Therefore [encourage] each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5.11

God's work

The almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, Ruler of the vast cosmos, Redeemer and Savior of His people, Lord of lords and King of kings – *this* God has redeemed us to do good works: growing in grace, loving our neighbors, bearing witness to Christ, increasing in holiness, bringing His goodness and beauty to light, edifying our brethren, building His Church, and advancing His Kingdom.

It takes courage to live this kind of life, pursuing such works as these. The unbelieving world is not always agreeable to our undertaking such efforts, and we are easily distracted to less-demanding occupations. Thus, we need a disposition of heart and soul that inclines us to take risks, embark on difficult tasks, and go beyond our present capacities into new areas of growth and service.

We need *courage* to live and work for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Establishing and maintaining that disposition is the work of God's Spirit, the *Encourager*. He uses the Word of God, the Presence of God in creation, everyday situations, and the words of encouragement we offer one another to help us work out our salvation, increase in Christlikeness, and take up things exceedingly abundantly beyond what we have ever known or done before (Phil. 2.13; Eph. 3.20).

He gives us the *courage* we need to realize more of the fullness of God, so that He Himself may overflow from us, like rivers of living water, to refresh and bless our world (Jn. 7.39). This is what God wants for you. And He stands ready to *encourage* you to these ends.

But how can we know when God is encouraging us? When He's getting ready to ignite a bolt of courage in our soul? What are the components of encouragement that He uses to generate holy power for good works from within?

Components of encouragement

God's work of encouragement is not an exact science. It's as much a mystery as anything else. He doesn't always encourage us in stages. Sometimes He moves us to leap tall buildings in a single bound; but most of the time it's here a little, there a little (Is. 28.9, 10). It is possible, I believe, to recognize certain movements of God's Spirit as He stirs and nudges us toward courage for something or other.

Just as important, we need to recognize the components of encouragement because God calls us to encourage one another. He chooses to work in us and through us, in collaboration with the Holy Spirit, to create that lightning strike of spiritual energy which gives someone the courage to move forward in the faith.

How can we know when God the Encourager is trying to encourage us?

When something in the Word of God grips your mind and holds your attention, leading to meditation, asking questions of God, and searching the Scriptures for more light on the subject, it's probably God stirring you in some particular way, toward some specific task, work, or person.

When you find yourself thinking about a passage, a person, a need, a notion, or an action, so that it stays with

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you for many days, alternately exciting and delighting you and causing you to hesitate or doubt, that may be the Lord, preparing you for something He wants you to do.

When you get an idea that seems to come from nowhere, or that develops and grows, like a living thing, out of some passage you've been meditating on, sermon you've heard, book you're reading, or some situation in your life sphere that demands attention, it might well be God, laying the groundwork for courage.

Or when you are so convicted of the need to do something that you seek out friends, counselors, and leaders to talk with, and you spend more time talking with God about the matter, it may be His way of wanting to encourage you to some specific work.

When you feel mixed affections in your soul – a sense of being unsettled, the excitement of something new, a need to answer nagging questions, fear of doing something, fear of doing nothing, the prospects of joy – it may be the Encourager of God, getting you ready for something exceedingly abundantly beyond what you've ever known or done before.

When some believing friend has come alongside you in a new way, with new interest and attention, asking deeply spiritual questions about your walk with and work for the Lord and offering to pray with and for you, it may be the Encourager at work within your friend, charging up the ground of your soul for a lightning strike of courage.

The fact is, in sincere Christians – believers who have embraced their calling to the Kingdom and glory of God, and who are seeking His Kingdom and righteousness in everything they do – these stirrings by God's Spirit are not uncommon. When we find ourselves being thus encouraged, we need to try to focus before the Lord on what He's wanting to do in and through us.

The key component

My sense is that the courage we need to move or grow or undertake in some new project or way will come as other believers provide a continuous supply of encouragement to spark new energy for growing and making progress with the Lord.

And this makes it really important that we know how to encourage one another. The Holy Spirit – the Encourager – is always at work in every believer, laying the groundwork for courage within the parameters and for the specific ends we have previously discussed.

But what makes courage spring up within us is when He brings other believers alongside to *encourage* us in specific ways. The more we learn about how to encourage others, the more likely we are to recognize the Lord's encouragement when it comes to us.

Learning to encourage others is a sure way of being more consistently encouraged yourself. And it is to the work of encouragement – a work to which every believer is called – that we turn in this part of our study.

For reflection

1. How do you know when the Spirit is encouraging you in some particular way?
2. Why do we need courage from the Spirit to do the works God has redeemed and saved us to do?
3. What's the most encouraging thing someone has done for you lately? Can you see the work of God in this?

Next steps – Preparation: Try to become more attentive to the stirrings of God's Spirit within you. Each time you sense Him trying to encourage you, take a few moments to pray, give thanks, and open your heart to His work.

2 Acknowledge

And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.” So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. Luke 19.5, 6

A heart of love

Encouragement is the work of God’s Spirit. He gives us courage from within, where He dwells in the soul and is working to make us more like Jesus. But He often does the work of encouragement through others, in various ways, to ignite the spark of courage in our souls, so that we begin to grow or move in the direction He intends.

The Spirit was working on Zacchaeus. Only the Spirit could move him to seek Jesus. People are not naturally inclined to do so. If there is going to be any movement toward Jesus, or toward becoming more like Jesus, it will only be because the Spirit makes it happen. So the Spirit was already stirring Zacchaeus’ soul for something new.

Then Jesus looked at him and called his name.

Zacchaeus “made haste and came down” and received Jesus joyfully after Jesus spoke to him, revealing His will and instructing him in what he should do: “Zacchaeus, come down, for today I must stay at your house.” The Spirit used the words Jesus spoke to set off a charge of spiritual energy in the little man’s soul. He immediately obeyed and was filled with joy.

The Spirit of God was working in Zacchaeus to put in place a heart of love for Jesus. Jesus, from His heart of love for the lost Zacchaeus, spoke in the power of the Spirit to his ready heart. The Spirit struck like lightning in Zacchaeus, and he was immediately filled with courage to do what Jesus commanded.

All simply because Jesus *acknowledged* him.

Small beginnings

Sometimes the most energetic storms will begin with a single lightning strike. In the case of Zacchaeus, a dramatic and radical change of life began when Jesus looked up at him and called him by name. That simple gesture of acknowledgement led to conviction, repentance, renewal, restoration, and incorporation into the Kingdom of God.

It doesn’t take much to acknowledge people. Not everyone we acknowledge will be charged with spiritual energy by the gesture. But encouragement can often begin with our simply acknowledging someone, and we can do that in a variety of ways.

For example, address people by their names: “Zacchaeus...” In his book, *The Naming of Persons*, Swiss psychiatrist the late Dr. Paul Tournier explained that our names are our most precious possession. When our names are used or called, we perk up and pay attention. Hearing our name puts us on “ready” to receive whatever might come next.

We naturally brighten when someone calls us by our name. Perhaps using our names is one way God Himself gets our attention for His love and calling: “I have called *you* by your name; you *are* Mine” (Is. 43.1). When God gives us the faith and courage to believe the Gospel, He begins by calling us by name. It’s not an audible call, but it is intensely personal, and one we hear in our heart, as the Spirit comes to give us a new heart and the faith to believe in Jesus (Gal. 4.4-6).

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By using people's names – in conversation, meetings, emails and texts, and more – we acknowledge them as persons, individuals who are unique and worthy of being acknowledged as such.

We can also acknowledge people by praying for them by name and then, following the example of the apostle Paul, telling them we have prayed for them. We see this in many of Paul's epistles. He will often mention that he prayed for people so that they would understand he had them on his mind when he was doing important business with the Lord. Acknowledging that someone is important enough to take before the Lord in prayer can provide a powerful spark of encouragement.

You can also acknowledge people by commenting on their insights, contributions, or ideas, or on something they did or achieved. We saw Paul doing this in his two epistles to the Thessalonians and his second letter to the church in Corinth. He mentioned specific things they had achieved or become, and he commended them, before encouraging them to excel still more.

Be sure also to thank people who have acknowledged or encouraged you, or in any way have served you by example, words, or deeds. Such acknowledgements can go a long way toward ensuring that whatever those folks did for you, they will continue to do for you and others.

People are not encouraged when they are ignored or made to feel unimportant – not sufficiently important even to remember or use their names. Get in the habit – like Jesus – of looking people in the eye, using their name, and mentioning something about them that is Christlike or potentially so. Such acknowledgement may be just the spark someone needs for the next step into exceedingly abundantly more of Christ and His Kingdom.

Work on love

But you're not likely to become more consistent in acknowledging people if you're not growing in love for them. The Spirit works *through* us when He overflows *from* us to bring refreshing grace and truth into the lives of those we hope to encourage (Jn. 7.37-39). Unless we are nurturing love for others in our heart, it's not likely that the Spirit will have many waters of encouragement to flow from us.

We grow in love for people by praying for them, giving thanks to God for them, and for many things about them, interceding for their needs, and asking the Lord to prepare us for the next opportunity to encourage them in Him. If we would like people to pray thus for us, we should pray for them, especially for the people we know we're going to see throughout the day.

Effective, fervent prayers for others will issue in words and deeds expressing that love – not long speeches or jumping-in-front-of- a-bus works of heroism, but consistent and carefully-chosen greetings and words, and simple gestures of acknowledgement and appreciation that affirm a person's significance in the Lord.

Acknowledgement is not all that encouragement entails. But it's a good place to start. And a good practice to work on in any case, whether or not anyone is ever encouraged, like Zacchaeus, to make further progress in their walk with and work for the Lord.

For reflection

1. How did Jesus acknowledge the woman at the well? Peter, when he asked to come to Him on the water?
2. What is it about being acknowledged by someone that can provide a spark of encouragement?
3. How would you like people to acknowledge you today?

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Next Step – Preparation: Use part of your prayer time to acknowledge the people you will see today and to prepare to acknowledge them when you're with them.

3 Attend

“...lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Matthew 28.20

“...I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” John 14.16, 17

God with us

Undoubtedly the greatest comfort and encouragement any of us can know is the Presence of God with us, in all we do, at all times, working within us and displaying Himself around us for His glory and our benefit. We are not alone. Ever.

Not only is He with us, but He continuously *attends* to us and to all our needs. If He were not so attending to us, we would cease to exist.

This is something I fear we too often take for granted. And when we do, we miss the opportunity to know the love of Christ, the power of His grace, and His true Presence with us, willing and doing of His good pleasure. The more we are mindful of and give thanks and praise for the attending Presence of the Lord, the more our confidence in Him grows, the more our love for Him increases, and the more we are encouraged and emboldened to live for Him in every moment and every facet of our lives.

Sometimes, that attending Presence and love of Jesus comes to us from a fellow believer.

In the Old Testament we frequently read that the Lord “remembered” His people – as in Exodus 2.24: “So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.” Our translations of that Hebrew verb, *remember*, can be a bit misleading. It’s not as if God somehow lost sight of His people, captive in Egypt, or that it slipped His mind concerning what He had promised them. In contexts like this, what the Scriptures want us to understand is that God was *attending* to His people, even in their separation from Him. Indeed, this was the main reason for sending Moses to them, through him to *acknowledge* them as His people and assure them of His attention, love, and Presence with them. As the people observed God *attending* to them, they took courage, and followed Moses out of Egypt and through the Red Sea to the mountain of God.

Isn’t this much like the way we are with our children sometimes? Running alongside them as they take off the training wheels for the first time, continuously repeating, “I’m here, I’m right here.” Holding their hand and assuring them of our love as they endure some painful disappointment. Cheering them on by name with words of encouragement and gentle reminders: “You can do it, keep your eye on the ball.”

Children thrive on such attention, and so do we all. The more we attend to one another, the greater will be the opportunities for the Holy Spirit to do a work of encouragement through us.

The work of attending

When you were in school, your teachers took *attendance* every day, to know who was present and ready to work. In some ways, the work of attending is like going to school, where you make your presence known (“Here!”), prepare your tools for the work of the day (books, pencils, notebooks), pay attention to the teacher, make sure of your assignments, and offer your work when called on to do so.

Acknowledging people by name and affirming them for who they are and what they do is a good place to

begin lining up the spiritual charges that might connect between us and another for encouragement. But attending to the people around us is just as important. We need to be available to them, equipped and ready to serve as we are able, and ready with a word or deed when the opportunity arises.

Attending to others grows out of our love for them. It includes acknowledgement, which it reinforces continually, but goes beyond to more personal involvement. You'll want to check up frequently on those you are sent to attend. Let them know you're praying for them. Ask about their walk with and work for the Lord. Pray with them. Share some thoughts or resources. Ask questions and listen attentively. And offer to help any way you can.

All Christians are called to do works of ministry (Eph. 4.11, 12). That word, *ministry*, derives from a Greek word that indicates a person waiting on tables at a banquet. He keeps his eye on those to whom he is assigned, checks with them from time to time to see if they have any needs, and is ready with refreshment or to remove dishes as needed. Such a *minister* doesn't hover or nag; his goal is to attend with grace, not to be obsequious or overbearing. Thus, he must try to fit into the situation of those he is called to attend – discreetly, thoughtfully, and helpfully.

We are attending to others when we adopt the mindset of a servant, keeping an eye on those God has assigned to us in our [Personal Mission Field](#), coming alongside them as we are able, listening, affirming, offering suggestions, and doing whatever we can to help them in their calling from the Lord.

Attendants all

Think of all the people who are in *attending* roles: attending physicians, flight attendants, personal aides and attendants, grooms, butlers, and servants of various kinds. Their diligent, dutiful, and timely *attending* helps others be the people and do the work they're called to be and do. Each of us is called to be an attendant in the Kingdom of God (Mk. 10.42,45), looking out for and attending to the needs of those to whom the Lord sends us day by day.

Thus attending to people doesn't come naturally. We don't want to be nags or a hovering and unwelcome presence in people's lives. But everybody needs help and encouragement. Every one of us appreciates the attention we receive from those who love us. We need to study up on the work of attending and acquire some new skills in this discipline, so that we can be used as channels of God's grace to the people around us. Because in some of those people, the Spirit's work in us, leading us to attend to the needs of others, will strike a spark with the work He's doing in their souls. A bolt of encouragement will flash, and the one we attend will have courage to live and serve in ways beyond what they've ever dared to ask or think.

I know, attending to others like this doesn't seem very heroic. Or to require many special and extraordinary gifts, special knowledge, or abracadabra sudden flashes of genius. Attending to others is like God's attending to us – continuous, careful, little by little, and always motivated only by love.

And powerful to encourage.

For reflection

1. Who presently attends to you in ways that help you be who you are and do what you do? What do those attendants do that's so helpful?
2. Attending to others is a skillset. What should such a skillset include?
3. How can prayer help you to become a better attendant of others?

Next Step – Transformation: What opportunities for attending to others will you have today? Prepare for them in prayer. Get

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your skills ready, and do the work of attending to others as the Lord leads.

4 Affirm

I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day, greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy, when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also. Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. 2 Timothy 1.3-7

Power to love

Paul's primary message to his young protégé Timothy was that he should not lose sight of love as the primary fruit of faith and the goal of all Christian instruction and ministry (cf. 1 Tim. 1.5).

Pastoral ministry – any life that gives itself to ministering God's grace to others – is difficult work. It can seem to be endless and unmerciful in its demands. Think of Jesus, urging His disciples to come with Him on a little vacation, only to find that time of “rest” intruded upon and washed out by multitudes of people seeking His help (Mk. 6.31-34).

Ministry is like that, yes it is.

The pressures of being others-oriented and self-denying can build, and we can end up seeing all the tasks and duties upon us, all the acknowledging of and attending to others, as ends in themselves which, the more they stack up, the more odious they become.

But if we keep in mind that the end of all we do is love, we can bear up under the burden of our calling to serve others like Jesus. And this can encourage not only us, so that we show Jesus' love to others, but it can stir up His love so powerfully in others that He overflows from them to the people God sends them to each day. That's what Paul was trying to do for Timothy – loving and encouraging him, so that he would continue to love and encourage others.

It's not hard to imagine that Timothy, a young man and fairly new at this work, ministering to the saints in the bustling cosmopolitan city of Ephesus, frequently felt overwhelmed. Doubtless, we feel the same sometimes. At such times, our thoughts may turn inward, to what we need, we want, and we wish might happen. Meanwhile, in our soul, the Holy Spirit continues generating spiritual charges aimed at our encouragement and the encouragement we can give to others. We don't want to stifle those or quench the work of the Spirit. Whether we know it or not, we need someone to come alongside us, acknowledge our struggle, pay us some attention, and affirm our calling and significance before the Lord.

This is precisely what Paul was doing in the opening verses of his second epistle to Timothy.

The work of affirmation

By writing to Timothy, Paul both acknowledged his friendship and collegiality, and attended to his needs and concerns. He'd done the same in 1 Timothy, and he was doing it again here. Our text reveals the role of affirmation in adding to acknowledgement and attending to inspire courage for love in others. Let's take a closer look.

How did Paul affirm Timothy as a friend, colleague, and servant of the Lord? First, by remembering to pray for him, and by telling him that he did so (v. 3). Whenever people tell you they're praying for you, something sparkles in your soul, so much so – if you're like me – that you may experience a flutter in your soul. Probably lots of people pray for us; but few take the time to tell us they do. When they do, we are affirmed as someone

worthy of others' time in prayer. And we're right to be so affirmed, because being held up to the Lord in prayer by people we love and respect is a big deal.

But Paul also expressed his love for Timothy in a specific way: "greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy" (v. 4). It's one thing for someone to say to you, "I love you, bro." It's another thing altogether, and much more affirming, when someone says, "Man, I can't wait to get together. I could almost burst with tears of joy just thinking about it." We're more likely to be affirmed when someone expresses love in specific ways, ways that give us a glimpse into their heart.

Paul continued by affirming the validity and importance of Timothy's faith, and of his faithfulness in the pedigree of faith handed down to him (v. 5). Paul was "persuaded" that Timothy was a true man of faith, a faithful follower of Christ, like his mother and grandmother before him. Do you think you'd be affirmed, and more likely to persevere in love, if others told you they love and admire you, and that they can see the evidence of faith in you, just like in other faithful Christians?

Paul also revisited an aspect of their own relationship, going all the way back to Timothy's being ordained to the ministry. Remember God's calling, Timothy? When I and the others laid hands on you? Prayed for great gifts to be given you? And when you vowed to take your place in that faithful train of the servants of the living God? Yeah, that was sweet. Let me just remind you of that, and let's dwell on that together. Each of us has a calling from the Lord – to seek His Kingdom and glory right where we are, as witnesses for Jesus in everything we do (1 Thess. 2.12; Acts 1.8). Being reminded of that, and that we're part of a great company of those who are similarly called, can be very affirming, leading to courage to press on in Christ.

With a view to action

The Holy Spirit of God is working in our soul to encourage us. He is the Encourager, sent to give us the courage we need to go beyond where we've ever been in the life of faith, and to press on to attain exceedingly, abundantly more than we've ever dared to ask or think (Phil. 2.13; Eph. 3.20). The courage He gives us, and which He often uses others to ignite in our soul, is designed to put us into action. The courage of the Spirit overcomes every fear that holds us back, taps into power that can make us effective witnesses and servants of Christ, and enables us to act in love for the glory of God and Jesus Christ.

Paul affirmed Timothy by reminding him of the outcome God was seeking, and which Timothy was called to know and to equip others to express: the love of Jesus Christ. Pope John Paul II was one of the great saints of the last years of the 20th century. He saw himself as a servant to believers everywhere, in every communion, but especially to those of his native Poland. His message to them, when he visited them, was always the same: "Don't be afraid." His acknowledgement of their suffering, his attending to them by visiting them as often as he could, and his unflinching words of affirmation gave them the courage to stand up to their fears, shine the light of Jesus into the darkness of their gray world, and ignite a bloodless revolution that liberated Eastern Europe and pulled the rug out from under the Soviet empire.

Don't underestimate the power of affirmation. Affirmation is not the same as encouragement, but it's part of the work of encouraging others. The more we acknowledge the people to whom God sends us, attend to their concerns and needs, and affirm their faith, calling, friendship, and potential, the more lightning strikes of encouragement will flash in their souls, leading them to overcome their fears and draw on the Spirits' power for love.

For reflection

1. When was the last time someone affirmed you in your calling as a follower of Christ? How did that make you feel?
2. Looking at our text, summarize the important components of affirmation which Paul reveals here. How can you begin to practice these more consistently?

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3. Are you beginning to acknowledge and attend to the people in your Personal Mission Field more consistently? What can you do to become a more affirming person?

Next steps – Conversation: What opportunities for conversation will you have today? Pray that God would use you to affirm others in their walk with and work for Him.

5 Advise

Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me... 1 Corinthians 7.1

*Your testimonies also are my delight
And my counselors.* Psalm 119.24

One another

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are members of one another in His Body. Paul argues this point strenuously in various places, as do Peter, James, and John. We do not follow Jesus merely on our own. While we are certainly responsible for the life we live unto the Lord, we must not seek to live that life only by our own wits or strength. We need one another in the Church, which is abundantly clear by all the “one another” instructions and exhortations that appear throughout the New Testament.

“One-anothering” is a give-and-take discipline. Each of us has something to learn from others, and each has something to give or something to share. Practicing this consistently creates avenues of spiritual “charging” along which, as needed, genuine encouragement can flow. As we teach and correct one another, pray for and share with one another, bear one another’s burdens, admonish one another, and – most importantly – love one another, we create bonds and relational byways that can make our work of acknowledging, attending to, and affirming one another all that much more likely to generate true encouragement as needed.

This is just another way of saying that encouragement – that work of God’s Spirit that gives us the courage to go beyond where we’ve ever been with Him before – rarely comes to us out of the blue, as it were. Friends, colleagues, teammates, loved ones, teachers, and co-workers are more likely to encourage us when we need it. Though we may occasionally be encouraged by a stranger or even some well-known writer or preacher, more often, it’s going to come from those who know us and will be with us as we step out in courage to follow the Lord’s leading.

Encouragement occurs in community, where the strength of the Body, growing and working together, infuses new strength in its members to excel still more in whatever God calls them to do. As we build relationships of mutual love and trust, opportunities will arise for us to give advice to others, and to receive advice from them, so that we continue making progress in our striving for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

We all need advice from time to time. So we should all be ready to *give* advice as the need and opportunity arise. But what does that mean?

The conditions for advice

Anybody can give advice, and some people are by nature more ready to dispense advice than others. But for advice to contribute to encouragement, certain conditions must be in place.

First, for us to receive advice from someone, we need to understand that advice is needed – that *we* need some advice. People who try to advise us or proffer some opinion when we have not sought it are more likely to irritate than encourage, to cause us to put up defenses rather than to embrace suggestions. We’ll be open to advice when we feel like we need it, and certainly as we go seeking it from trusted advisors.

The Corinthians who wrote to Paul knew they needed some help. They sent emissaries to Ephesus specifically to ask his advice about issues and situations that were troubling them. As we’ve seen, Paul’s advice wasn’t all that easy to receive. But, as we’ve also seen, the Corinthians received it, were encouraged by it, and grew through their difficulties to a higher stage of church life together. They were *in need* of some good

advice, to give them the courage to do what they must; so they welcomed Paul's hard words and acted on them, knowing that he loved them.

So also with Joseph and Daniel. Each of them faced a ruler who was troubled and unable to find any reliable counsel. Each had established some credibility with that ruler; thus, when they proffered their advice, it was duly received, though what they advised required some significant work on the parts of each ruler. Pharaoh, to his credit, received Joseph's advice and acted on it promptly. Nebuchadnezzar had to descend a bit further into his confusion and distress before he realized the value of what Daniel had told him. But when each was *ready* to be advised, the advice they received was just what they needed.

Further, we must not seek, nor seek to give, any advice which is not grounded in the counsel of God's Word. What God tells us in His Word is not always the easiest path toward a solution of our concerns. But it is always *God's* path. As we are seeking to advise those who have come to us for counsel, and are thus open to our advice, we want to make sure – like Joseph, Daniel, and Paul – that our advice is grounded in divine revelation. We might be able to think of many clever things to say or courses of action to recommend, but if they are not in line with God's purposes – to advance His Kingdom and bring glory to Himself – our counsel will most likely end up *discouraging* rather than encouraging someone.

Giving advice

The word “advise” suggests some thoughts about how to proceed in this important component of the work of encouragement. According to the *OED*, “advise” derives from a Latin root which means “to see.” Originally the word meant to “look at” or “consider” some suggestion or course of action. Thus, “advice” is merely a suggestion or an opinion. We should not give it as though it were the last word on the matter. And we should receive advice from someone only if it seems to suggest a resolution in line with God's calling.

When we are advising someone, we're asking them to consider this idea, suggestion, or course of action. We're trying to introduce a Biblically-based insight or scenario which has not yet occurred to the one we're trying to encourage. The more we listen, ask questions, and try to understand what our advisee is struggling with, the better able we will be to suggest directions, courses of action, or next steps that can result in genuine encouragement.

Sometimes advice can take the form of a mind-stretching vision or way of thinking: “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” More likely, our advice will help to recall, clarify, or stretch a vision for following Jesus that already exists, but has become clouded for one reason or another. By talking someone through their understanding of discipleship, and of their own calling as a disciple, we might be able to indicate some next steps that will light a spark of encouragement in their soul.

We must not fear to seek advice nor to give it, for we are strengthened and encouraged by the work of God's Spirit in and through His Body. When we're ready for advice – sound *Biblical* advice – God will lead us to those who can help us in the next steps of our journey. And He can use us to advise and encourage others in theirs.

For reflection

1. How do you know when you are ready to hear advice from someone?
2. Why does advising work best between friends?
3. How should you test any advice others may offer?

Next steps – Conversation: What opportunities for talking with other believers will you have today? How might you be able to tell when someone is seeking your advice?

6 Assist

And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them—walking, leaping, and praising God. Acts 3.7, 8

Peter the encourager

The story of Peter's healing of this man who was lame from birth demonstrates the components of encouragement we have examined thus far.

How many people, used to seeing this beggar "laid daily at the gate of the temple" simply walked past without looking at him or saying anything to him (v. 2)? Undoubtedly, he was used to that, and to the discouragement and humiliation that must have come with it.

Peter and John, however, stopped and acknowledged him. "Look at us," Peter said to the man. Who had ever spoken to him like this before? Probably very few, if any. "So he gave them his attention" (v. 4). Now the apostles, having acknowledged the lame man and beginning to attend to him, affirmed his need "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you" (v. 6). And Peter went further to advise the man what he must do, "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (v. 6).

Just that fast – acknowledge, attend, affirm, advise. A man who had never walked before now felt something happening within him. He had heard the Name of Jesus, perhaps, but had he ever heard it spoken over him before? Not likely. He wanted to believe. He longed to be able to do what Peter advised. He was encouraged to hope that his life might be about to change.

And yet, he still sat, his eyes fixed on Peter. So Peter "took him by the right hand and lifted *him* up" (v. 7). As the man responded to that assistance and began to move toward getting up, "immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength" (v. 7). His incipient faith was rewarded with miraculous strength from God. And so, "leaping up", he "stood and walked and entered the temple with them – walking and leaping and praising God" (vv. 8, 9).

The Holy Spirit enabled this man to have the courage to attempt something he had never done before. Something he may have thought about, perhaps longed for, but ultimately always despaired of being able to do. The courage and strength to walk came by the work of Jesus and His Spirit, through the words and help of Peter and John.

Just so, we should expect the Spirit to work in encouraging us, and in using us to encourage one another.

A little help from a friend

I suppose that lame man would have simply continued to sit in that gate had not Peter reached out and taken him by the hand, lifting him to his feet. That was all he needed to jumpstart the faith that was beginning to enliven his soul and transform his body. Just a little help from a friend.

Lending people some assistance, like Peter did this lame man, can help them act on the courage God is giving them to go beyond in their walk with and work for Him. If we want to be true encouragers, we must be ready to assist people in acting on the courage God is giving them. It's not enough just to advise someone concerning a decision or course of action. Courage will rise within them, toward whatever exceedingly-abundantly-excel-still-more next step the Holy Spirit is preparing if we make ourselves available to assist them in getting off the ground and standing up.

The Work of Encouragement

What forms might such assistance take? While the specific forms of assistance we might render are probably infinite, let me mention just a few that I have found helpful.

First, *open a door* for someone. One of the reasons people don't grow in the Lord any more than they do, or don't serve Him effectively, is that they can't see the way through to do so. Their Christian life looks like a closed door, behind which they are safe, and beyond which they have no idea what they might encounter or expect. You can open a door for someone, like Peter did, and help them take a first step toward new growth or ministry, offering a bit of vision, joining them to practice some new discipline, take up a new work, or begin some new effort of service for the Lord. If you'll go through the door with them, they might find the courage to continue on their own, as the Lord leads and enables.

You could also *make a contact* with someone who can help them, someone on the other side of that door who can open it to welcome your friend into the next phase of his walk with and work for the Lord. Someone who'll teach them a skill, walk a mile with them, or bring them into some existing work.

People can be encouraged to grow or serve by our *sharing a resource with them* as well. That can take many forms – a book to read, perhaps a small financial investment in their new effort, or, most of all, the gift of your ongoing time and attention as they take those first steps toward leaping and praising the Lord at another level.

Follow Peter's example and *lend a hand*. Do something together, even if it's just to help your friend take those first new steps in the Lord's leading. Lend your strength and time in your friend's effort to act on the courage the Spirit is giving them.

You can also *make room* in your own life or ministry for someone to serve with you. As you grow and work together, you'll be encouraged by your friend's participation as much as your friend will by the new experience of growing in and serving the Lord.

Finally, *pray* and *convey that you are praying* for your friends as they embark on those first next steps of growth and service in the Lord.

A way of life

Encouragement is a very practical discipline. It's not rocket science, and it doesn't need a lot of theological dressing-up. It's just you letting Jesus be Jesus in and through you, to connect with His Spirit in a fellow believer.

Encouragement can become a way of life if we will make the practice of these simple disciplines a feature of all our relationships. Always acknowledge people – their uniqueness, works, words, hopes, and fears. Pay attention to them; ask questions; listen carefully. Affirm where you see Jesus at work in them, whether in something they say, do, or are learning or becoming. When it's sought, advise them according to your knowledge of their calling and God's will. And be ready, when a lightning strike of encouragement flashes, to assist them in moving forward in any way you can.

Isn't this what you would like people to do for you? I know it is for me, and I am often encouraged, especially by Susie and my friends, that there is more to know about Jesus, there are more opportunities to increase in love for Him, and more ways to serve Him than I'm currently pursuing. It takes courage to keep pressing on toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. And with a little help from your friends, you can keep going forward, leaping and praising God as you go, living for His Kingdom and glory and encouraging others all along the way.

For reflection

1. Can you think of a time someone lent you a hand to take a next step of faith? Explain.

The Work of Encouragement

2. How did Peter's lending a hand to this lame man help to firm up his faith?
3. Do you feel like encouragement is beginning to be more a part of your walk with and work for the Lord? Explain.

Next steps – Transformation: Today, practice the disciplines of encouragement with everyone you can, calling on the Lord to give you the courage you need to do so.

7 Assess

Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And He said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven." Luke 10.17-20

Evidence of encouragement

How can we know when we have been encouraged? Or when we have encouraged someone else?

We said that courage is that disposition of the soul – heart, mind, and conscience – that leads us to go beyond where we have ever been with the Lord before – exceedingly and abundantly beyond, both in our walk with the Lord and our work for Him. Encouragement is the work of God's Spirit. He is the Encourager Who dwells in all who believe to make them willing and able to do what pleases God (Phil. 2.13). Frequently, the Spirit will use one of the followers of Christ to take part in His work of encouragement.

The work of encouragement – acknowledging others, attending to them and their concerns, affirming and advising them, and assisting them to take the next steps in the Lord – brings the Holy Spirit in us to connect with the Holy Spirit in others so that a bolt of encouragement occurs, giving others the courage they need to overcome whatever has been holding them back to begin making more progress in the Lord.

That courage can be for any number of actions – seek forgiveness, heal a broken relationship, take up a new work, bear witness to a co-worker or friend, overcome some besetting sin, begin a new practice of spiritual disciplines, and much more. Courage begins its work, like Peter, stepping onto the waves, in next steps of action toward a fuller realization of the Kingdom and glory of God. Courage grows as we act on it; it multiplies itself within us, by the work of the Holy Spirit, so our initial encouragement becomes ongoing courage to will and do according to the good pleasure of God.

When we're on the giving end of encouragement, we need to do what we can to help the person we're seeking to encourage take the steps God calls him to take. If we're the ones being encouraged, then the same is true. Courage is confirmed and, in a sense, unleashed, as we take the next steps of obedience according to the leading of God.

We can be helped in doing what we agree needs to be done if those who have encouraged us thus far will continue to do so by checking with us to assess our progress. The old maxim is as true for believers seeking to improve in the Lord as for everyone else: People don't do what you *expect*, but what you *inspect*.

Jesus understood this principle, and so did His disciples. That's why, when their first courageous mission had been completed, they reported to Jesus, and received His assessment of their work.

The work of assessment

Checking-up on those we have encouraged enables us to do several things, all of which are forms of assessment. Besides continue to strengthen our relationship with another believer, we can *review* the decision that was made as a next step of encouragement. Talking about what was decided allows us to reconnect the charge of encouragement between us, as well as to make sure we're both on the same page about the specific form of courage being taken.

When the project or action has been thoroughly reviewed, it's time to hear a report about *progress*. What was done? Was that in line with what was agreed? What happened as a result?

The Work of Encouragement

It is important to keep the focus on what was done and not so much on what came of it. We have no control over how our efforts to love our neighbors will affect them. All we can control is what God gives us the courage to do. Whatever that is, we must do it faithfully and diligently, as often as it was agreed the work needed to be done. God alone can bring Kingdom results from our efforts. But He will use our efforts to the extent that we are faithful and diligent in them.

At this point, it might be a good idea to consider any changes, corrections, or additional steps that should be taken to shore up or complete those taken thus far. At the same time, you'll want to celebrate the work that has been done, and to give thanks and praise to God for the courage provided and the progress made.

Finally, it might be appropriate to encourage augmenting the initial effort, rather like Jesus did when His disciples returned from their first mission. He had sent them to preach and heal; now he was giving them more power, "to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy" so that "nothing shall by any means hurt you." The natural follow-up on any first steps is to consider the next steps to take, and to try to enlarge the vision of what is to be accomplished as the work continues.

It's important

We need to take people seriously when they are planning some act of courage in a new direction of growth or ministry. It will be easy to become *discouraged* in this effort, so following-up to see how things are going is essential.

I am always encouraged when someone asks me about something we previously discussed – what I've done, how it's going, what progress I'm making and so forth. Such assessing of my work makes me believe in it more and want to excel still more in whatever I'm doing. A careful assessment of one's walk with and work for the Lord can itself compound the encouragement process, if the one who is doing the assessment understands the discipline of encouragement, and is not simply lording it over us.

Learn to encourage others – the whole beautiful process – and together we will be more courageous in seeking the Kingdom and glory of God. Encouragement is important. It matters. It's something we all need, and something we can all learn to give.

For reflection

1. Why is assessment an important part of the encouragement process?
2. How can careful assessment lead to more encouragement?
3. Where do you feel like you need some encouragement in your own walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps – Transformation: Whom will you encourage today?

The Work of Encouragement

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why is it important for us learn how to encourage one another?
2. How does the Holy Spirit work to encourage us? What is your role in that?
3. What can you do to improve in the disciplines of encouraging others?
4. What makes encouragement such a crucial part of our loving one another in the Body of Christ?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this part of our study on encouragement?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.