

Message #2

Kurt Hedlund

Encouragement

8/27/2017

ENCOURAGEMENT (Part 2):

HOW WE CAN ENCOURAGE

I.

Vic is a successful and wealthy businessman. He grew up in a middle class home with a father who had an average income. Vic's parents endured a mediocre marriage that was interrupted frequently by arguments over money. He remembers vividly the many complaints that his mother had about having to stretch the budget further than it would go.

Now Vic's hard work and perseverance have resulted in a comfortable income, a beautiful house in a prestigious neighborhood, a couple of cars, membership in the country club and a small yacht. But beneath the outward veneer of confidence and success lies fear: "I have to be more successful than Dad or I will be unhappy just like him."

Because Vic is a Christian, part of his success package includes church attendance, prayer before meals and occasional family devotions. People at church like Vic. He is a pleasant and outgoing guy. But nobody really knows Vic very well. He has some fears in life, but they remain shielded from view. In actuality Vic is driven by a sense of inadequacy that pursues these visible reminders of success. Vic is blind to his own spiritual weakness. He is in need of Biblical encouragement.

Ralph is different. He is visibly insecure. He is a blue collar worker--- the son of a blue collar worker. He spends most of his leisure time working in the yard and watching TV. He is a decent husband and a good father in many ways. He happens not to be an extrovert and a smooth talker like Vic. He doesn't hide his emotions very well. He hasn't developed effective layers about him to shield him from the fear that he has of being unimportant.

When Ralph shows up at the adult Sunday school class, no one is especially excited by that. While Vic is shaking hands and chatting away, Ralph takes four or five minutes to put sugar in his coffee and stir it. Motivated by persistent pressure to be what he should be, he tries to live a good Christian life. But Ralph has not seen a lot of spiritual fruitfulness in his life. Lately he has been drinking a little more and spending time online looking at adult web sites.

Vic and Ralph represent two endpoints on a continuum of Christians who are more or less successful in developing strategies to deal with their fears. Two Sundays ago we began a brief topical study on the subject of "encouragement." Many of my thoughts come from a book entitled *Encouragement: The Key to Caring*, by Christian psychologist Larry Crabb.

Last time we considered why we need to encourage our fellow Christians. We discovered from our discussion of Genesis #3 v. 10 that sin produces in us human beings fear. We fear rejection from God and from other people. To cope with these fears we humans have a tendency not to address them but to hide them. We develop layers around ourselves to protect ourselves from rejection, from being found to be inadequate or insignificant or unworthy of love and respect.

Then we considered Hebrews #10, especially vv. 24 & 25. There we saw that the Biblical author commanded God's people to be involved in helping others to discover the security and significance that they have in Christ by means of encouragement. I pointed out that the term "encouragement" in the New Testament has two aspects. It involves comfort, as was the nuance in 2 Corinthians #1, and exhortation. Encouragement is designed to relieve the fears of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ so that they will be properly related to the God who is really there and so that they will be stimulated to love and good deeds.

II.

We want to consider then THE PROPER FOUNDATION for encouragement. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE PROPER FOUNDATION...) The proper foundation for encouragement is realization of the benefits that come from a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ. In Ephesians #3 v. 2 the Apostle Paul writes (EPHESIANS 1:3), "**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...**"

In the remainder of the chapter Paul describes these spiritual blessings. Some of them relate to **security**. The author points out that Christians have forgiveness of sins and sealing of the Holy Spirit. In some sense we have been seated with Christ in the heavenly places. Other listed blessings relate to **significance**. We are told that we have become adopted sons of God. Therefore we have a divine inheritance waiting for us. We also have divine power that has been made available to us. My argument last week was that it is significance and security which are the greatest psychological needs that all of us human beings have. (THE PROPER FOUNDATION...) Thus THE PROPER FOUNDATION FOR ENCOURAGEMENT IS THE REALIZATION OF THE SIGNIFICANCE AND SECURITY WE HAVE IN CHRIST. Every true Christian already has this foundation present with him or her. Ephesians #1 describes that foundation for us.

III.

We then need to consider THE PROPER MOTIVATION for Biblical encouragement. (III. THE PROPER MOTIVATION) The proper motivation for encouragement is love--- love that comes as the result of God's love for us. The Lord Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves. So THE PROPER MOTIVATION FOR ENCOURAGEMENT IS LOVE FOR GOD AND LOVE FOR OTHER PEOPLE. (THE PROPER MOTIVATION...) In order to encourage our neighbors we must be motivated by the desire to treat them as we would want to be treated ourselves. We ought to exhibit Biblical love.

This means that the focus of our concern has to be the needs of the other person. We can use encouraging words but have as our real motivation the desire to use another person to meet our own needs. This is manipulation rather than encouragement.

Suppose that I become convinced that the church needs a full orchestra. Suppose that I go to John Doe and say to him, "John, we have a big need. In order for us to get where God wants us to be in our worship services, we need a full orchestra. Don has his hands full with all that he does, and I know that you were a faculty member at the Julliard School of Music before you retired here to Boulder City. Keith Lockhart at the Boston Pops tells me that you do a great job of substituting for him when he is away. So we think that you could do the job here. We have been praying about this for a long time, and the Lord seems to be telling me that you are the one for the job. It would only involve about 25 hours a week, volunteer of course. What do you say? Would you be willing to serve the Lord and answer His call?"

There may have been some encouraging words in this spiel, but is this an example of Biblical encouragement? The motivation behind these words is certainly not love for John Doe. My focus of concern is not on his needs but on my own, or perhaps on the church's. Whatever this is, it was not Biblical encouragement. It is probably not even the best approach to church recruitment. It is an example of manipulation.

With Biblical encouragement the needs and fears of our fellow Christians become the focus of our attention. Biblical encouragement requires that we get involved with people. That involves risk. We risk the possibility that other people may reject us.

When someone new sits down beside us in church, many of us feel just a little bit uncomfortable. Perhaps we hesitate a little bit to speak to him or her. We recognize that this is probably the right thing to do. But it means that we have to be a little vulnerable. Maybe this new person won't be very responsive. Maybe he wants to be left alone and to just see what is going on. Maybe she has actually been here a few times and will be offended that I haven't notice her before.

A good encourager will take risks and will become involved. He or she will be motivated by love, and will recognize the new person in this situation is more likely to have the greater amount of insecurity and the more fears of rejection because the visitor is in a new environment. Encouragement, especially of fellow Christians, requires that we be motivated by love.

IV.

Once we become involved with people and are motivated by a genuine love for them, they may begin to reveal some of their challenges and struggles and fears. We then need to have THE PROPER ATTITUDE. (IV. THE PROPER ATTITUDE) Having the proper attitude requires that we keep in mind three principles.

A.

The first principle is that we should RECOGNIZE FEARS WITHOUT REJECTING PEOPLE. (IV. A. RECOGNIZE FEARS...) Jesus was the perfect example of this. When people opened up to him about their fears and challenges and shortcomings, He was accepting of them. When He met the Samaritan woman at the well, He knew that she had a less than stellar background. It was contrary to the social norms of the day for a religious person like Jesus to even talk to such a woman. But he carried on a conversation with her and addressed her spiritual need.

When people begin to open up to us, when they seem to put their guard down a little bit, when they peel away a layer of protection, when they reveal a fear, they are risking rejection. Maybe we won't accept them. Maybe we will be judgmental. Maybe we will blab to other people. Maybe we will have less respect for this person.

Our responsibility is to communicate acceptance. We need to demonstrate that people, especially fellow Christians, are secure with God and with us. We need to demonstrate that they are significant both to God and to us. When people sense acceptance, we have the real opportunity to exercise either exhortation encouragement or comfort encouragement.

A number of years ago when I was in Massachusetts, I was given the name of a young man who had called the Billy Graham organization as a result of watching one of his crusades on television. I called him up and explained that I was given his name and that I worked in a nearby church. He agreed to meet with me. When we got together, he was nervous and anxious. He finally told me that he had experienced a couple of encounters with homosexuals and that he was deathly afraid that he had contracted the AIDS virus. He also suffered from panic attacks. In the midst of this fear and anxiety he

wanted to turn in faith to the God of the Bible. It seemed to me that he probably had put his faith in Jesus. But he still had fears about whether Christians would accept him.

The first principle about having a proper attitude in Biblical encouragement is to encourage exposure without rejection. This young man, you see, was being vulnerable. He was peeling away layers and revealing pain and fears and wrong behaviors. I am sure that he was wondering how this pastor, this representative of God, this evangelical Christian was going to respond.

I encouraged him to trust in God and to follow Jesus, and I offered to meet with him for Bible study. We met several times. I encouraged him to come to church with me. He was hesitant at first. Finally he came on a Sunday evening. It was tough for him to do that. It was hard for him to be around other people. I tried to get him to return and to continue in Bible study. But he dropped out. So I can't claim that it was a great success story. But the point is that we need to convey a certain attitude of acceptance to people around us, especially fellow Christians, so that we can have the opportunity to exercise Biblical encouragement to them.

B.

A second principle to keep in mind is that we should SEEK UNDERSTANDING BEFORE GIVING ADVICE. (IV. A. B. SEEK UNDERSTANDING BEFORE...) When people reveal their problems, they are not always looking for answers or advice. They may be asking, "Do you care? Will you accept me?" Perhaps they are looking for advice, but they will accept it only if we communicate a genuine sense of caring.

I still sometimes forget this with my wife. If I come home from work, and she has had a difficult day, and if she begins to share a problem or a difficulty that she has encountered, my natural tendency is to move toward answers. But that usually is not what she needs--- at least at first. She wants compassion, and she wants to know that I care and that I understand. Advice given without understanding and a sense of compassion may be received as rejection. Quickly moving to answers communicates a lack of compassion and interest. It says, "I'm busy. Let's move on to other things." So as good encouragers, we need to seek understanding before giving advice.

Grasping this principle is especially important in situations of grief and tragedy and family crisis. Our tendency in situations like this where some kind of loss has occurred is to suggest reasons for what has happened or to somehow justify God for the taking of someone or something from us. Sometimes we are inclined to give advice to a loved one about how they ought to act or how they ought to grieve. The better attitude to have is to focus on understanding. We need to listen. We need to express our care and support and to look for ways that we can be a help to that person or persons.

The more that we understand what makes an individual tick and what experiences he has had, the more we will be able to encourage him. People have fears of rejection. They desire security and significance. They fear insecurity and insignificance. The better that we understand what form these fears take in a fellow Christian, the better job we will be able to do in calming that individual's fears and stimulating him or her to love and good deeds.

V.

Consider then THE PROPER METHOD for Biblical encouragement. (V. THE PROPER METHOD) There are two things that we need to do if we are going to speak words of encouragement.

A.

The first is that WE NEED TO BE SLOW TO SPEAK. (V. A. BE SLOW TO SPEAK.) In the little New Testament Epistle of James the half brother of Jesus writes in #1 v. 19 (JAMES 1:19), "**Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...**" If we want to do a good job of encouraging our fellow Christians, we need to listen to them. We need to understand them.

Hebrews #10 v. 24, a verse dealing with encouragement that we examined last week (HEBREWS 10:24), says, "**And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works...**" The original verb for "consider" means "to perceive clearly, to understand fully." Earlier in the book, in #3 v. 1, the author uses the same word (HEBREWS 3:1) when he says, "**Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession...**" The idea here seems to be to think about Jesus and what He has accomplished.

To consider, then, how to encourage our fellow Christians requires some contemplation. It requires time and energy. It means that we need to ask questions. We need to try to understand. We need to think about what people tell us. If we give out answers or advice too quickly, we will do a less than effective job of encouragement. Our friend or relative may perceive our advice as rejection. Or perhaps that person is not looking so much for advice as she is for compassion and understanding. Or perhaps we may misunderstand the situation because we have not yet received enough information to give effective encouragement. So we need to be slow to speak.

B.

The second thing that we need to do in terms of our method of encouragement is to BE GENTLE. (V. A. B. BE GENTLE.) People are being vulnerable when they share their fears and hurts. In Proverbs #15 v. 1 the author (PROVERBS 15:1) writes, "**A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.**" Verse 4 in the same chapter adds (PROVERBS 15:4), "**A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.**"

When people open up to us, when they share a fear or a problem or a struggle in their life, they become vulnerable to rejection. We have to be gentle. We have to demonstrate acceptance--- even if we need to bring a word of exhortation. If we use put-downs or snide remarks or if we become defensive and are emotional, we are unlikely to be effective at encouragement. We must be slow to speak, and we must be gentle.

C.

Then third we must EXHORT OR COMFORT AS NEEDED. (V. A. B. C. EXHORT OR COMFORT AS NEEDED.) Being a somewhat older congregation we have had a lot of deaths. We just had a memorial service here yesterday. We have had a lot of widows and widowers who have been left behind. These people naturally need the comforting kind of encouragement. They need reminders especially of the security that they have in Christ.

Imagine how encouragement might work out with our friend Vic. Suppose that he attends Bethany Baptist Church. Suppose also that I have my own business like Vic does, and we have a few common interests. The two of us become casual friends. Perhaps we play tennis a few times together, and I begin to perceive that behind Vic's outward facade of confidence and success, there are some insecurities and fears. I suspect that these insecurities hinder him from spiritual growth and joyful service in the Christian life. I don't address these things for a while. But as our friendship deepens, Vic begins to share more of himself.

Finally one day Vic says some things about how hard he has been working at his business lately and that it has been getting to be a little too much. So I ask him where he got his work ethic. He says that he wants to provide well for his family and to be a success in business. I ask him about his upbringing and begin to find out about his father's way of being, that he didn't make a lot of money and that his mother dumped on his father about that. Perhaps I ask Vic if he is worried that he might turn out like his father.

Perhaps Vic doesn't but that idea initially. But he begins to think about it and recognizes that there may be some truth to that thought. Something is said in the adult Sunday school the next week that reinforces what Vic was told by his friend. The Holy Spirit seems to make this through resonate in his mind. I am also praying for him. A few weeks later he hears something in the sermon that the wonderful pastor preaches and that also prompts him to look honestly at his own motivations.

Maybe Vic begins to change his thinking a little bit. Maybe he begins to recognize that he is holding on to material symbols of success a little too tightly, and that his priorities and source of dependence are a little off. Some spiritual growth takes place.

Then there is Ralph. Suppose that I have not seen him in church for several weeks, and I spot him at Walmart. I'm mostly just waiting around for my wife to finish shopping. At this point I have to make a decision about whether I am going to pursue an opportunity for encouragement. For some of us that is not always an easy decision to make. If I go over and talk to Ralph, he might reject me. He might not really want to talk to me. Maybe he feels guilty about having missed church. Maybe he is actually going somewhere else to church. Perhaps having a conversation with Ralph will be embarrassing for both of us.

Let's suppose that, motivated by love, I step out in faith and walk over to talk to Ralph. I have to decide what to say. If I decide in my mind that Ralph's basic problem is that he just needs to go to church more regularly, I might say, "Hi Ralph, I haven't seen you in church in a long time." But how is that going to come across to Ralph? Perhaps he will perceive that to be a kind of rejection, a kind of judgmentalism. Lack of church attendance may only be a symptom of a deeper problem.

Perhaps a better way to approach Ralph is to be slow to speak and to be gentle: "Hi Ralph. Good to see you. How are things going?" That hopefully communicates: You are a significant person to me. I care about you. Perhaps Ralph says, "OK. Been awfully busy with work, though." I would interpret that as Ralph saying that he is feeling guilty about having missed church. So I ask him about how work is going. He says that he's been working a lot of overtime down at the plant. We talk about work for a while.

After a bit, I might decide that it is time to end the conversation. I might say something like, "My wife is probably ready to go. I better find her. Hey, I enjoyed talking with you. I miss seeing you around. See you later." That wouldn't be too bad. I didn't come across as being judgmental because he hasn't been in church lately. I showed a little bit of care for him. I indicated that I like having him around. There is probably at least a little bit of encouragement in that.

Suppose that I decided to go further than that. Suppose that I offered to take him out for lunch the next Saturday. He takes me up on that, and I start developing a friendship with Ralph. I invite him to come to Sunday school with me. Perhaps he opens up a little bit with me. Perhaps I have the opportunity to encourage him.

It is possible that neither Vic nor Ralph would respond to my efforts to encourage them. It could be that I still have some things to learn about being a good encourager. Perhaps I have fallen short. But the problem could be with Ralph and Vic. Ralph and Vic, like you and I, are sinners. Sometimes we sinners are not only fearful but also we are stubborn. Ralph and Vic may choose to resist my encouragement. They may choose to reject opportunities for Christian fellowship. They may choose to resist God and His



work. Our primary responsibility is to obey and serve God. We ultimately have to entrust people to His sovereign care.

Unlike Vic and Ralph, Gary was a real person. He was an active layman in another church in which Suzy and I served. He seemed to be a strong Christian in many ways. He was a single fellow in his 50s when I knew him. He seemed to have the spiritual gift of evangelism. He was frequently sharing his faith with people at work and with people he hung out with.

Gary was faithful in attending church and church events. After almost every sermon he would have some particular thing in the sermon that he would pick out and tell me that he appreciated. So he was an encourager himself. If Gary found out about a physical need or a financial need that someone in the congregation had, he would often try to meet it himself.

After working for the railroad for a number of years, Gary decided to regain his teaching credentials and take up teaching again. He got a job in an urban school district in Fort Worth and left our area. We found out later that Gary had a hard time dealing with discipline in the classroom. He didn't feel like he was succeeding in that environment. A couple of months after leaving Texas, Gary killed himself.

We were all shocked. People who knew him found it hard to believe. What this tragedy revealed was that below the surface of this seemingly mature Christian there were significant fears and insecurities. Gary had been in desperate need of Biblical encouragement. No one in the church had been aware of the magnitude of his need.

Each of us has a need for encouragement. Our Biblical responsibility is to focus on others and to encourage them. As we do that, often our own need for encouragement is met.

Some people are better encouragers than others. Some Christians have the spiritual gift of encouragement. But all of us can work at being just a little better encourager than we are right now. Perhaps we will not always say exactly the right thing. But generally people will recognize and appreciate our sincerity when we are trying to be encouragers.

The Lord has told us in His word that we have a responsibility to be encouragers. **"Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."**