

**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 10: Encouragement**

*Safeguarding Unity in Holiness*

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**I. Introduction (Welcome, Prayer)**

Encouragement. It’s a good thing. As Christians, we know it’s something we’re called to do. But it’s also something that can be vague. Is encouragement just another word for “being nice?” As we open, I want to ask you all: *What are some of the goals of true encouragement, according to scripture? Why should we encourage one another?*

Listen to what Paul’s goal for encouragement was, from Col 1: “*Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ*” (Col 1:28). We are called to the same goal – presenting others mature in Christ. We read in Hebrews, “*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.*”(Heb 10:24-25) That same sentiment is echoed in our church covenant. “We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church, exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.” So, here’s a definition of encouragement: *Caring for someone else – usually including speaking biblical truth to them – with the goal of that person’s growth in godliness.* I say “usually” because you might be able to encourage someone without words, by bringing them a meal, for example, but, Biblically speaking, encouragement generally has some content to it – and that content should come from God’s Word.

What a massive responsibility: encouragement for the purpose of holiness. Together, we are in a life and death struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. And our calling is to help each other cross the finish line by the grace of God. God is the one who ultimately preserves us, and yet, he uses means to do that. One of those means is the body of Christ.

Part of fulfilling that calling includes confronting explicit sin, as we talked about last week. But the Christian life involves much more than that. It involves thousands of daily decisions that form the storyline of our lives. We need encouragement if that story is going to be one of joyful trust in Christ until our final day. And therefore encouragement is crucial for our unity as a church. When we encourage one another in Christ, that ensures that we’re united around Christ and not other things. When our unity is suffering, we need to be well-skilled in the art of encouragement so we can point one another to what really matters and help one another work past the seeds of division.

Let me lay out a brief outline for our time together. We’ll start by examining what makes encouragement tough to do well. Then we’ll look at the type of relationships that are required to make this happen. And finally, some practical guidance for how we can speak gospel-drenched encouragement into the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

**II. The Challenge of Encouragement**

So first, what makes this difficult? Two things we must be aware of when we try to encourage others:

First and foremost,
**A) *Our Struggle is One of the Heart*** —it involves the core desires that motivate our decisions and actions every day. And, as we read in the prophet Jeremiah, “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (17:9) The evil desires of the heart are what James points to both as the cause of *temptation* (1:14) and *conflict* (4:1). So when we find that our brothers and sisters in this church are making decisions that don’t align with their identity in Christ, we know that the problem isn’t primarily external but the working out of sinful desires in their own hearts.

This is important because so often, when we’re in relationships with other Christians and we see things in their lives that are dishonoring to Christ, our goal is often to get them to behave in a different way. “If only he wouldn’t spend so much time around those people.” “If only she would spend her money differently.” “If only he would switch into a job that gave him more time with his family.” But as we know all too well, behavior isn’t the root of the problem. A few implications of this:

* First, only God can change the heart. We are *his* instruments. And so as we get involved in others’ lives, we must remember that prayer is our best tool, that guilt and coercion can’t correct deep heart issues, and that our desperation for God to act increases the glory he’s due. There can be good, appropriate times to help others work for behavior change—holding someone accountable for habitual sin, for example. But better behavior isn’t our ultimate goal. Ultimately, we care about matters of the heart.
* Another implication: when we encourage others, we must remember that our hearts are prone to wander too. It’s no accident that immediately after Paul exhorts us to restore those caught in sin in Galatians 6:1, he warns us against our own pride and self-reliance. Our hearts are darker and capable of more evil than we’ll ever realize.
* And, last: the importance of the heart reminds us that our goal isn’t to help others feel happy and fulfilled. There are many ways to achieve this that, tragically, never get to our heart issues. Our goal for encouraging others is that they would be transformed in their desires to seek Christ above all else – that, in the end, is what leads to true and lasting joy.

So the first challenge we face as we struggle to encourage our brothers and sisters is the deceitfulness of the heart – their heart and our own.

*Hollow and Deceptive Philosophies*

A second enemy is worldly thinking. What I have in mind are Paul’s words in Colossians 2:8. “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.” To use this terminology, we are all philosophers. We all, all the time, are creating philosophies of meaning in our lives. What matters? Why do things happen? What’s worth living for? And though we usually know what the right answers are to those questions, we’re easily deceived by philosophies that are human and worldly rather than based on truth.

And the people that we’re trying to encourage in one ear have the world shouting through a megaphone into their other ear. And we’re the same way. Our guiding philosophy should rest on the truth of the gospel—but even as Christians, our lives are often inconsistent with its truth. In their book “How People Change,” Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp call this the “gospel gap.” A gap between what we know is true in the gospel and how we live.

And they observe that such gaps don’t stay empty. We—and the others in our church—are often operating with a mix of gospel truth and other philosophies that, though they sound biblical, have at their core the values of this world. The authors identify seven of these substitute philosophies. I’m going to walk through them—and as I do, I want us to think of where we might recognize these as being true in our own hearts—or how others you know might adopt some of these false philosophies.

1. The first is “Formalism.” I participate in regular meetings and ministries of the church—and so I feel that my life is under control. I may always be in church, but it has little impact on my heart and on how I live my life. I may become judgmental and impatient with those who don’t go through the same motions I do. Christianity is being in the right place, going through the right motions.
2. The second is Formalism’s close cousin “Legalism.” I live by rules—rules I create for myself, rules I create for others. I feel OK if I can keep my own rules. And I become arrogant and full of bitterness when others can’t meet the standards I set for them. There is no joy in my life because there is no grace to be celebrated.
3. Next is mysticism—the incessant pursuit of an emotional experience with God. I live for the moments when I *feel* close to him. But if I have no emotional high, I assume God doesn’t love me or he’s not real.
4. Activism is when I get excited about Christianity mainly as a way to fix this broken world. I base my relationship with God on how much I’ve done to alleviate poverty, but my own heart is far from him.
5. Then there is Biblicism—reducing the gospel to a mastery of biblical knowledge and theology. I know my bible inside and out, but I don’t let it master me. And so I am impatient with those with lesser knowledge.
6. Sixth is the Therapeutic gospel. I may talk a lot about how Christ is the only way that healing and help can come to those who are hurting. Yet without realizing it, I have made Christ more therapist than Savior. I view the sin of people against each other as a greater problem than my own sin against God—and I treat Christianity simply as a way to get problem free, to have a happy life.
7. Finally, what you might call “social-ism.” The deep fellowship and friendships I find at church can become their own idol—the body of Christ replacing Christ himself. And the gospel is reduced to a network of fulfilling Christian relationships.

Seven anti-gospel philosophies, all of them based on half-truths, that we’re prone to believe - which is exactly why we need encouragement. Encouragement serves to correct faulty philosophies of what Christianity is all about. I remember taking piano lessons as a kid and my teacher often stopping me when my hand posture would revert back to the wrong way. When we give Biblical encouragement, we act sort of like a piano teacher who gently and regularly helps her student recognize and eliminate bad theological habits that have crept in. She not only corrects poor posture, but models the right way to play. Like that teacher, we must expose false ways of thinking, and help one another delight in the truth. As Paul says, “*We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ*” (2 Cor 10:5).

So that’s the challenge: to battle the desires of the hearts, recognizing that we swim in a sea of worldly philosophies that challenge fundamental Christian truths about who we are. If that’s what we’re up against, next we should think about the context for change, by which I mean the kinds of relationships that promote encouragement toward holiness.

**III. The Context for Change:**

James 5:16 says, “*Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”* There are two things that we need in a church to have a healthy culture of encouragement: a willingness to reveal struggles, and a willingness to listen and help when others reveal their struggles. Nothing I say in this class will be of any use if you’re not willing to reveal your struggles to others and if you’re not close enough to others to know when and how they need help.

A few thoughts on what we can do to cultivate this type of church context. On sharing our struggles: let me encourage us to take the opportunity when appropriate to embrace the “ministry of dependency.” There is nothing Godly about stumbling on alone in your struggles because you are too proud to let others help you. Give others the opportunity to minister to you. One of the kindest things we can do for those who are struggling, and considering joining our church, is making it clear that the church is full of people just like them because it’s full of all of us.

And, on serving those who share their struggles with you: When someone bears their soul to us, we are called to take them seriously. One thing that helps is to refrain from offering trite solutions that make it sound like only a complete fool would have that problem. “Struggling with depression? Just read your Bible more. And spend more time in the sun. Then you’ll feel OK.” What may seem simple to you could be a lifelong battle for someone else. When someone opens up to you about a struggle, it’s as if they’ve just offered you a jewel. It may be rough and disfigured - but you now get the stewardship to listen and help polish that jewel so that it becomes a reflection of God’s sanctifying work.

So those are just a few thoughts on the context of relationships that we need to build. Relationships that are honest—and relationships that welcome struggling people.

QUESTIONS?

All of that leads us to: **IV. How to Encourage Struggling People**

The Christians around us are fighting the flesh and they’re fighting the hollow and deceptive philosophies around them. We’re exhorted to encourage them, to instruct them. How do we do that?

The answer is that it depends on the person. But Scripture has given us immense wisdom in thinking through this issue. Listen to 1 Thes 5:14: *“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”*

When we encounter the struggle of a brother or sister in Christ, it’s useful to run through those three categories in your mind. Are they idle, or “unruly” as the New American Standard puts it? Are they fainthearted and in need of motivation?Are they simply weak and in need of someone to help shoulder their burden? And how can I do this with patience?

Whatever category they’re in, I want to suggest three things we should do. First, speak Scripture to them. That doesn’t simply mean throwing a verse at them. Usually to speak the truth to someone in a way they can hear, we first need to show that we love them, and we need to get to know who they are and what it is they’re facing. Then, once we do, we want to convey the truth of God’s word to them - maybe by reminding them of a pattern in salvation history—perhaps of God always proving himself faithful. Or simply studying a passage of Scripture with them. But speak Scripture.

Second—help them meditate on the good news. Speak to them about different aspects of what Christ has done, and get specific. For the person wrestling with guilt and shame, Christ has shouldered our blame so that we can enjoy reconciliation with the Father. For someone experiencing loneliness, Christ has brought us adoption in the Father’s family. For the person fighting constant temptation and indwelling sin, Christ has made us new and filled us with his Holy Spirit. We know these things as Christians, but we so often need help connecting these truths to the situations we face each day.

Third – identify evidences of God’s grace in their lives. Recognize whatever fruit the Holy Spirit is growing in them and tell them about it. If someone is tempted to doubt if they’re really a Christian, this can help them in their assurance that God truly is transforming them. This is what Paul did in so many letters. When he wrote to the Corinthians, even though he had a lot of rebuke coming, he opened his letter by saying, *“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge”* (1 Cor 1:4-5).

What we’ll do now is walk through 3 case studies -- examples of what this might look like for each of the three categories Paul lays out in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. With each, I’ll give some background on the hypothetical person, and then we’ll discuss a couple of questions together.

***A) Warn those who are idle***

We’ll start out with that first category: Letter A, “admonish the idle.”

Let’s say, to begin with, you’re talking with Sue—who will not remove herself from the path of temptation. She has found that she’s very tempted to be in love with the things of this world—and watching a particular show on TV seems to always leave her discontent with the life that God has given her. But she really, really likes it—and has fun talking with friends at work the next morning after the show airs. You’ve talked about how this show may be playing a more destructive role in her life than she might realize—and while she confesses that the show does regularly lead her to be sinfully discontent, she hasn’t stopped watching it. She is idle, and seems apathetic about her soul.

Two questions: First, *Where is the gap in Sue’s understanding of the gospel?* **\*Teacher: get the class to actually discuss these questions. Possible talking points are in brackets, but don’t feel the need to use them.** [[It is around the issue of what it means to truly repent. As Paul said, “We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Rom 6:2). Does she understand what repentance should look like for a Christian? What it means to take Jesus’ words seriously: “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off ” (Mark 5:30).]]

Second, *What would you say to Sue?* [[Talk with her about the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorry in 2 Corinthians 7. She may regret watching the show, but she is not repentant. “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” (v. 10) Warn her of the consequences of sin in her life. Positively, encourage her in the joy and contentment that comes from pursuing the things of the Lord (Ps 119:1-3), and from knowing herself to be someone who has not deserved God’s love but has received it because of his grace (Rom 5:8).]]

 ***B) Encourage the fainthearted***

So, that’s an example of warning those who are idle. Let’s think about Letter B, what it means to “encourage the fainthearted.”

For this example, think of Joe. He’s in his late twenties and is still trying to figure out what to do with his life. He works in a dead-end job, doesn’t find himself particularly useful at Church, would like to get married (sort of) but isn’t anywhere close... and he’s been struggling for several years with what God’s purposes are for his life. He feels like he’s close to giving up—though he doesn’t know what “giving up” would really mean. But it sounds dramatic. He rarely serves others, but he says he would like to – he just doesn’t think he has anything to contribute. When he looks at all the elders, he feels like they’re all “Super-Christians” and he’s just a nobody. Nobody really knows him, or cares.

Let’s discuss the same questions. *Where is the gap in Joe’s understanding of the gospel?* [[[It could be in several places. In a strange way, he could have fallen into legalism—having begun with the Spirit, he now thinks of his goal in terms of human effort. He considers his worth as directly related to his productivity—or his lack of productivity—and that has resulted in despondency. So remind him that his worth before God is grounded in Christ’s finished work, not his own. ]]]

*What would you say to Joe to encourage him?* [[Help him to understand his responsibility as rooted in the opportunities God has given him. His value doesn’t come from the approval of others. Share with him the glorious hope God has given all those who are his children: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). Share about how all Chrsitians in the church are gifted to care for each other (1 Cor 12:25).]]]

***C) Help the weak***

Let’s move to the last of the three pieces of this verse: “help the weak.” Who is weak? In a sense, we all are. But there are some in our midst who weak in ways that make them especially spiritually vulnerable. This might come through certain circumstances in life that make it difficult each day to keep trusting in God.

For our example, let’s take Max. Max has been diagnosed with clinical depression. He’s unable to do the amount of good that he once could. He struggles mightily with his relationship with God now that many of the emotions of faith he once counted on—without ever realizing it—are few and far between. Through work with his pastor, he has come to recognize some of the spiritual roots of his problem. But his mind is more susceptible to that downward spiral of depression, and there is a physical side of his condition that is hard to escape. In this situation—though not always necessary, his doctor is helping him on the physical side of things with medication—yet Max is discouraged and downhearted in so many ways. Max is weak.

First question: *What might be some possible gaps in Max’s understanding of the gospel?* [[Consider *how* he is weak. He may be weak in faith. His present emotions feel like they will last forever, and so God’s promises seem so distant as to appear non-existent. Help him learn to trust God more than himself. That is, after all, one essence of the gospel. Or perhaps the help he needs is the constant reminder that there are Christians in his life who love him, and whose love is rooted in something much more secure than his own “lovability.”]]

Second question: *What are some things you could do or say to encourage Max?* [[Share with him the gospel of hope. Help him to see how his sufferings are producing perseverance, character, and ultimately, hope (Rom 5:3-5). Remind him of the reasons he has to trust the goodness of God even as he questions why he is struggling in this way. (2 Cor 12:8-10).

🡪 Especially in this category of those who are weak, we can’t be content to simply dispense truth at people and feel like our job is done. Sometimes we need to be quiet and listen or simply be present with them while they suffer. Other times we need to pray for them, to meet physical needs and provide fellowship. We shouldn’t *only* speak the truth, but do these things and by doing them, create opportunities to speak the truth.

*Be patient with everyone*

Finally, Paul says “be patient with everyone.” Whether it’s someone who is physically weak, someone who is frustratingly obstinate, someone who thinks they’re doing great and doesn’t need your encouragement - our posture is patience. Your job is never to condemn, never to shame someone by how slow their growth is going. And true patience comes from knowing how patient our heavenly Father has been with us. Patience delights to serve your brothers and sisters because they are reflections of God’s character, and because gratitude for God’s patience runs deep in your soul.

We love because he first loved us. Our love comes from his love and ought to reflect his love. Because of that, may we labor to present each other mature in Christ.