

## Encourage One Another

I've heard it said that it takes 10 compliments to cancel out one criticism. As a parent, that makes me wonder if criticisms in chunks count as one criticism, like when I have to tell my kids five times in succession to stop messing with something. Does that count as five or one? If it's five, their self-esteem might never recover!

Even if the precise math here might be up for debate, the overall principle isn't. Children or grownups alike, all of us appreciate positive feedback and reinforcement. When we don't get that positive reinforcement, whether verbally or through some other means, we're less likely to continue doing the right thing.

This is particularly important when it comes to serving God. Christians who never receive any praise, any sign that they matter to somebody else, any kind word at all, may well end up falling away. From time to time, all of us need somebody to lift our spirits and help us to keep going. As part of our series on being heaven bound together, then, let's consider what we can do to encourage one another.

The simplest way we can encourage our brethren is BY SHOWING UP. Look here at Hebrews 10:24-25. This is, of course, the famous do-not-forsake-the-assembly passage. However, there's a lot more here than that bald statement. According to the Hebrews writer, the opposite of not showing up is encouraging one another. When we assemble with the saints, we are being encouraging.

This happens first of all simply because of our presence in the pews. Every warm body in this auditorium this morning is contributing to our worship service being an encouraging one. This is true in the aggregate. What would all of you rather see when you come in and worship this morning, an auditorium packed full of people who are eager to worship God, or an auditorium that's three-quarters empty with crickets chirping in the corners? It matters even to the most spiritually mature Christian on the planet that other Christians care enough to assemble with them.

Indeed, even our particular individual presence can be encouraging. Like most preachers, I've been through the wars. I've baptized people on Sunday who fell away by Wednesday. I know very well how fragile a newborn Christian can be. As a result, when I see those newborn Christians come back the week after, and the week after that, and the week after that, it eases my heart. Every assembly is a victory!

The same is true of Christians who were out of duty or simply not very committed, who now are making a whole new effort to serve the Lord better. Even now, I have a sense of which Christians here I can expect to see every Sunday morning, or expect to see back on Sunday or Wednesday evening. When a brother or sister comes to worship and I didn't expect them to, that's encouraging! It's something that Shawn and I will talk about during our Tuesday meeting. The point is, brethren, that we

can be a powerful force for good simply by showing up every time the doors are open. Let's all of us resolve to do that!

Second, we can encourage one another BY STANDING FAST. Consider Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 3:6-8. In context, Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians only a few months after he established the church in Thessalonica. This is a group of newborn Christians whom he can't help because the enemies of the gospel had driven him out of town. Naturally, he's rather anxious and depressed about the whole thing, until Timothy shows up with news that rather than giving up, the church in Thessalonica is thriving. How glad Paul is to learn that his brethren are remaining committed to Christ!

The point here, friends, is that even a great Christian like Paul could be encouraged, indeed strongly encouraged, by the godliness of ordinary saints. None of us will ever grow so strong in the faith that we don't need help from one another. Even the most overlooked Christian in this congregation will lift the hearts of the preachers here, will lift the hearts of the elders here, by doing nothing more than remaining faithful to the Lord. When it comes to encouragement, every Christian matters.

This is certainly true for me. The last couple of years before I left Joliet, the Lord blessed my work with a fair amount of fruit. There was some attrition, but when I left, there were perhaps half a dozen brethren there who had only been Christians for a year or two, some only for several months.

More than anything else, I regretted leaving those brethren behind. How would they fare without me to look after them? Like Paul, I was concerned about how things would go. Thankfully, it's obvious that the brethren in Joliet have picked up the slack, and through Facebook and other means, I've received word that those Christians are continuing in Christ. All of us have people like that, people who matter to us, and all of us matter to somebody. Let's never doubt the positive effect our faithfulness has on them!

Third, we can encourage one another BY REFRESHING THE SPIRIT. Paul describes his experience with being refreshed by his brethren in 1 Corinthians 16:17-18. Now that we're getting into summer, all of us are about to be reminded of how important refreshment is. Refreshment is when you come in all hot and sweaty from mowing the lawn, and you suck down about half a gallon of ice-cold lemonade. You sit back and you just sigh with relief!

Sometimes, we need refreshment in the spiritual realm too. We all know that life isn't easy. We all know that being a disciple of Jesus isn't easy. In fact, it's not supposed to be. What's more, many of the difficulties we face are continuing. The same life obstacles keep coming up, the same spiritual problems keep coming up, and over time, they wear us down. They exhaust us.

At times like that, some Christians have the knack of being ice-cold lemonade for the soul. They see that we're beaten down, and they come to us with a kind word and a hand on our shoulder. They tell us how much they admire us and how much they appreciate the work we do. Sure, we're supposed to keep going whether anybody notices or not, but I tell you this—it's a whole lot easier to keep going when somebody does notice!

We like to be noticed, but we also should work on being that brother or sister who notices. We should pay attention to what people look like when they come to services, to what they are saying online, to their tone of voice when they tell us how they're doing. If we think something's up, we don't have to pry. All we have to do is praise and encourage. If they aren't going through a rough patch, they'll hardly be offended, and if they are, we might make more of a difference than we can ever know.

Fourth, we can encourage BY SPEAKING TRUTH. Look at the behavior of Judas and Silas in Acts 15:30-32. In context, this comes right after the big Jerusalem council about whether Gentiles have to be circumcised. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the apostles and elders decide that it's not required. They dispatch Silas and Judas with a letter reporting their findings. The two prophets then encourage in two different ways. They faithfully deliver the apostolic message, and they add their own exhortation.

Today, none of us are prophets, but we can still use the prophetic word to encourage. However, in order to be truly encouraging, we must faithfully repeat that word. This isn't always easy. Like God Himself, God's word is no respecter of persons. The truth will sting sometimes, so if we fear conflict, we often face a temptation to bury the truth.

However, if the truth causes conflict, the problem isn't with the truth. It's with the heart of the hearer. When the seed of the word is sown on a good heart, it will always encourage. Maybe it will encourage us because we're already doing what we ought to be. Maybe it will encourage us to do a better job in future. I would much rather be told the truth about how I need to repent than hear a lie about how I don't have to. In that case, the truth may still sting, but it's the sting of a spiritual antiseptic keeping our souls from getting infected.

The point is that we all need truth-speakers. Sure, preachers can be truth-speakers, but ordinary saints in the pews can be too. We must never be afraid to point others to what they need to hear from God's word. Sure, the outcome may not be good if we do, but if we hide the truth, the outcome is guaranteed to be bad.

Finally, we encourage by WORKING FOR THE KINGDOM. Paul discusses the importance of this in Colossians 4:10-11. I think that nearly every Christian who tries to be useful to the Lord struggles with 1 Kings 19 syndrome sometimes. Like Elijah, we want to cry out, "I alone am left!" We get to thinking that we're the only

ones who care about evangelism, about kids' Bible classes, about song worship, or whatever our favorite area of service happens to be. It's like we're shouting charge and going over the top, but we look back, and everybody else in the congregation is still in the trenches. At least, that's how it seems to us!

I think it's extremely dangerous for Christians to get to thinking this way, and it helps us out a lot when we see other brethren who obviously are working. It's tough for me to tell myself that I'm the only one who cares about evangelism when other members of this congregation issued hundreds of invitations to our special service. It's tough for me to tell myself that I'm the only one who cares about song worship when I see all the work that Tim invests in helping us here despite his incredibly busy schedule. And so on.

The reality is, friends, that when all of us are working, it's easier for all of us to work. Rather than being the only one who is trying to prop up a failing church, we can see instead that we are growing and thriving together. Every one of us who does anything contributes to this vital impression.

Posted 4th June by M. W. Bassford