

ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

A young couple, very much in love, were getting married in church. However, the bride was very nervous about the big occasion and so the Pastor chose one verse that he felt would be a great encouragement to them. The verse was 1 John 4:18 which says:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear

The Pastor asked the best man to read it during the ceremony. He mentioned that he felt that this was a very good verse for the bride and that he would be speaking on it later in the service. The pastor did not know the best man was not a regular churchgoer and did not know the difference between the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John. During the service the best man introduced the reading by saying that the Pastor felt this was a very apt verse for the bride and that he would say more about it later in the service and then read John 4:18, which says

The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband.

Though this pastor wanted to encourage the couple his attempt went very wrong, but at least he tried. The truth is that most of the time we don't even try. We fail so often to encourage one another at all. When was the last time you made the effort to encourage someone?

Heb. 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. 14 We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

In this passage, the writer of Hebrews is building on the thought that Jesus is greatest. In chapter 1 and 2 he writes that Jesus is greater than the angels and in chapter 3 he starts writing that Jesus is even greater than Moses. He quotes Psalm 95:

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion..

In the middle of his thought he remembers how the children of Israel acted when they were in the wilderness. Many times they allowed themselves to grow discouraged and then failed. With this in mind the writer goes off on a tangent to warn his readers not to follow their example. How do we keep our hearts from becoming hard? How do we stay encouraged?

1. Stay Focused – unbelieving hearts (vs. 12)

The human heart is a very fickle thing. Even as Christians it is in our nature to turn away from God. We have a fallen sin nature. Like sheep we seem to have an ability to get into trouble and to wander off where we are not suppose to go.

Rom 7:22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The first step to staying encouraged is staying focused. We need to focus our hearts constantly. Our hearts are more like old manual focus cameras than the new autofocus ones. Directing them requires effort. Driving a car requires that constant adjustments be made to the steering.

Last week we sang the new arrangement of the song Come, Thou Fount. It was written by Robert Robinson who had been saved through George Whitefield's ministry in England. Shortly after that, at the age of twenty-three, Robinson wrote that hymn.

*Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.*

Sadly, after writing this hymn Robinson fell away and lived many years away from God. One day he was traveling by stagecoach and sitting beside a young woman engrossed in her book. She ran across a verse that she thought was beautiful and asked him what he thought of it. Quoting the words of his song she read:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;

Bursting into tears, he said, "I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then."

How very true it is that our hearts are prone to wander. Prone to leave the God we love. We see many examples of how fickle the human heart is in the Bible. On one occasion a crowd went from declaring Paul a god to stoning him in only one verse!

Acts 14:18 Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. 19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.

I have often heard youth wondering why they so often feel terrible the day after a great youth retreat. Pastors often experience 'Blue Mondays', a feeling of depression after an amazing time of ministry on Sunday. This is just a normal part of life.

To stay encouraged we need to keep our hearts looking forward. The first step is recognizing that within each one of us is a fallen nature and a sin seeking heart. We need to stay focused and maintain a positive God directed perspective.

2. Stay in Fellowship – encourage one another (vs. 13)

The second step to encouragement is recognizing that God has called us into community. One of the best ways of guarding your heart is to stay in regular worship and fellowship with other believers. I learned this the hard way. When I went off to university I thought I was a strong enough Christian to make it on my own. I was wrong. I needed a community to support me.

The word here use for encouragement here is PARAKALEO which comes from KALEO which means "to call" and PARA which means "near". In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is referred to as the PARAKLETE or comforter which is from the same meaning. For Roman soldiers, the PARAKLETE was the person who fought at your back, protecting you from being attacked from behind. With the help of Holy Spirit within us we as a family are all called to watch the backs of those around us.

John 16:1 All this I have told you so that you will *not go astray*.

The enemy is looking for those whom he can devour. The Greek word used here for going astray is SKANDALIDZO or trap. The SKANDALIDZO is the stick with the string attached that holds up the box waiting for the prey to arrive.

There is strength in numbers. This is one of the reasons why we as a church are so convinced that every person should be in a small group. As a small group we can watch out for each other. If a couple is having problems with their marriage there is support and accountability in a small group. It is easy to be missed in a church of over 500 but hard to be missed in a group of 12.

Let me ask you a simple question, who is watching your back. Do you have people you know are watching out for you?

When should we encourage? As long as it is called TODAY. We can't encourage yesterday and you may not have the opportunity to tomorrow. The time for encouragement is now. How do you encourage another person? You remind them of 3 things:

a. Remind Them of Their Position – where they came from

I get encouraged when I see how far the Lord has already brought me. I remember backpacking in Canada. We spent hours hiking up a huge hill. It was not until we reached the top that I could look back and see how far we had come from. How far has God already brought you? You can be sure that He will not leave you now!

Phil 1:6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus

Watchman Nee became a Christian in mainland China in 1920 at the age of seventeen. He once told of a new convert who came to see him in deep distress. "No matter how much I pray, no matter how hard I try, I simply cannot seem to be faithful to my Lord. I think I'm losing my salvation." Nee said, "Do you see this dog here? He is my dog. He is house-trained; he never makes a mess; he is obedient; he is a pure delight to me. Out in the kitchen I have a son, a baby son. He makes a mess, he throws his food around, he fouls his clothes, he is a total mess. But who is going to inherit my kingdom? Not my dog; my son is my heir. And you are Jesus Christ's heir because it is for you that He died." We are Christ's heirs, not through our perfection but by means of His perfection and grace.

b. Remind Them of Their Potential – where they are going

It is not only encouraging to see where God has brought us from but to see where God is taking us too. A simple word of encouragement pointing out the strengths we see in another's life can change that life forever.

Tell a man he is brave, and you help him to become so -- Thomas Carlyle

Words of encouragement fan the spark of genius into the flame of achievement -- Wilfred A. Peterson

Edward Steichen, who eventually became one of the world's most renowned photographers, almost gave up on the day he shot his first pictures. At 16, young Steichen bought a camera and took 50

photos. Only one turned out -- a portrait of his sister at the piano. Edward's father thought that was a poor showing. But his mother insisted that the photograph of his sister was so beautiful that it more than compensated for 49 failures. Her encouragement convinced the youngster to stick with his new hobby. He stayed with it for the rest of his life, but it had been a close call.

c. Remind Them of Their Partnership – who is with them

Often encouragement is simply being there for a person who is going through a rough patch in their lives. It is reminding them that they are not alone in the struggle.

A few years ago I was leading a service where a number of young people were getting baptized. One young girl got nervous when she came up in front of the church to give her testimony and froze. My heart sank as she started to cry. Her dad got up from his seat, walked up onto the stage, gave her a hug and then stood beside her. Her courage returned and she gave a beautiful testimony of God's faithfulness in her life. All she needed was to know she was not alone.

When we were in Kuwait I heard a pastor tell about his first full time ministry position as an associate pastor in a church. He was very new to the church and was called upon to give his first call to worship. This is when you quote a scripture at the beginning of the service. He stood up and with all the confidence he could muster he quoted Psalm 150:6 "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD". The problem was that he slurred his words so what actually came out was "Let everything that has BREASTS praise the LORD..." He says he was so embarrassed he could not finish the verse. After the service he knew that he was going to be fired so he went to his office and started clearing it out. An old elder knocked on his door and came in. He joked, "you know, I felt a little excluded in your call to worship today". Then he said in a very gentle way, "God has a wonderful plan for your life and he is using you in a powerful way. Don't let a little mistake get in the way of God's plan for your life". He was so encouraged by those words that he stopped packing. He went on from that experience and has had a very long and powerful ministry.

Encouragement is awesome. Think about it: It has the capacity to lift a man's or woman's shoulders. To spark the flicker of a smile on the face of a discouraged child. To breathe fresh fire into the fading embers of a smoldering dream. -- Charles Swindoll

How many people stop because so few say, "Go!" -- Charles Swindoll

3. Stay Fresh – hold firmly till the end (vs. 14)

I love the way the Message translates the verse we have been looking at:

Heb 3:12 So watch your step, friends. Make sure there's no evil unbelief lying around that will trip you up and throw you off course, diverting you from the living God. 13 For as long as it's still God's Today, keep each other on your toes so sin doesn't slow down your reflexes. 14 If we can only keep our grip on the sure thing we started out with, we're in this with Christ for the long haul.

We are in this with Christ for the long haul. The Christian life is more a marathon than a sprint. Over time anything can become stale. Even the new life we have in Christ can become dry routine and empty devotion. I love fresh bread. When it is right out of the oven there is nothing better. However, that same bread a week later can be stale and unappealing.

How about your walk with the Lord? Is it still fresh or has it grown stale over time? Our physical bodies respond to hardship by producing calluses to protect itself against damage. Our hearts also have a tendency to form calluses of protection against the hurt done to us as well. Encouragement is a way that the heart is able to drop its protective barrier and receive nourishment. Studies show that we need to receive about 7 positive statements to make up for each negative one. E.g. youth group. Who encourages you and who do you encourage?

Are you encouraging yourself? Are the things you tell yourself when you look in the mirror or face a challenge encouraging or discouraging?

1 Sam 30:6 David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the LORD his God.

The KJV of this verse says that: "David encouraged himself in the LORD his God."

Martin Luther once was so depressed over a prolonged period that one day his wife came downstairs wearing all black. Martin Luther said, "Who died?" She said, "God has." He said, "God hasn't died." And she said, "Well, live like it and act like it."

A young boy complained to his father that most of the church hymns were boring and old-fashioned, with tiresome words that meant little to his generation. His father challenged him with these words: "If you think you can write better hymns, why don't you?" The boy accepted the challenge, went to his room, and wrote his first hymn. The year was 1690, and the young man was Isaac Watts. Among his 350 hymns are "Joy to the World," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "I Sing the Almighty Power of God," and many other classics.