

How to Encourage a Meathead

I Thessalonians 5:11

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Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up.

- I Thessalonians 5:11

At my last church we had that verse printed on 3x5 cards, right under the title Encouraging One Another. We called them Encouragement Cards and placed them everywhere, the idea being you would fill out a card, drop it in the plate, and the church would forward it to the person you were encouraging.

“Encourage one another.”

Do you encourage or discourage? Do you pick out the good in people and affirm the positive? I dare you to ask someone, “Do people leave my company feeling built up or torn down? Are they encouraged or discouraged? Do they feel good about themselves?”

“Encourage one another.”

In Danville I got lots of those encouragement cards, especially after I preached. *Encouragement*. But you know, as I reflect, I realize that a lot of the encouraging was rather discouraging . . . some for rather obvious reasons. (Al used to say, “I could see you as a real pastor some day!”) Some were discouraging for less obvious reasons.

Most of the cards were bubbling, exuberant words of praise for a job well done. And this is the weird thing: Although I absolutely loved those notes, as I think back on it I realize they sucked the courage right out of me and filled me with fear.

After a sermon I was told to stand in the narthex and greet people. Tons of people would line up and say, “Oh, that was a wonderful sermon!” and hand me encouragement cards. And yet as I walked home I’d be a basket case.

American society has been shaped by modern psychology and specifically by B. F. Skinner and his theories on behavior modification. That is, like chickens pecking levers in a cage, we are shaped through rewards and punishments. He once called praise “the greatest tool in behavior modification.”

But social scientists have recently discovered that human beings are more complicated than chickens pecking levers in a cage. Joanie Shrof reports for U.S. News and World Report that social scientists have discovered “praise has been shown to have very disruptive effects on confidence, concentration, and performance. People who receive praise often become so self-conscious of their tentative good standing that they cannot focus on the task at hand, or

alternatively, they simply avoid challenging themselves in order to prevent the possibility of failure.”

That’s how I would feel after a good sermon, walking home from church. *Scared spitless* . . . because all that affirmation, encouragement, and praise was obviously conditional . . . tentative. What if next time I *bombed*? I wouldn’t be wonderful any more. Walking home I’d think, “Man, I hope I don’t have to preach again. I could really blow it.”

Fear of failure.
Fear of being exposed.

“They thought I was wonderful because I preached a wonderful sermon, but what if they find out I’m really a meathead? They’ll have lunch with me . . . expect me to be all deep, passionate, profound . . . and discover I’m usually shallow, boring, and stupid.”

So I’d walk home showered with encouragement and ravaged by fear . . . so scared I didn’t want to preach again . . . so discouraged that I needed encouragement. So I was driven to preach so I’d get more encouragement cards, which led to discouragement. I’d get eight encouragement cards after a sermon and be thrilled for a moment, but then I needed at least ten the next time.

These little cards were like an addiction . . . an affirmation addiction. I *needed* affirmation more and more.

Alfie Kohn in his book Punished by Rewards writes, “Rewards motivate people to get more rewards. The more rewards are used, the more they are needed.” I *needed* encouragement cards.

Why do you sing in the choir?
Clean your kitchen?
Run a race?
Go to work?
Volunteer at a shelter?
Teach Sunday School?

Why are you kind?
Why are you generous?

According to U.S. News and World Report, and I quote, “Experiments show that children who are praised for being generous with others actually end up being less generous than those who received no strokes.” Those praised learn to love praise. So they use generosity to get praise. Like the Pharisees, they give alms to be seen, not because they love the poor. They may *hate* the poor.

- Preach for encouragement cards, and you’ll grow to hate preaching, addicted to preaching, maybe even hating the one you’re preaching about . . . like the Pharisees hated God.

- Write books to receive critical acclaim, and you'll hate writing . . . like an evil taskmaster.
- Sing to hear people's praise, and you'll hate singing.
- Work for money, and I bet you'll grow to hate your job, addicted to your job for money, but hating it for the fear.

For many men—men especially—money is their encouragement card. It's the way our society says "Good job!" So the stock market crashes, and men commit suicide . . . not for lack of money, but for lack of courage. They were addicted.

Addiction,
 Enslavement,
 Driven-ness,
 Insecurity,
 Fear,
 Discouragement, even
 Hatred . . .

. . . all from "encouragement."

You know, in Danville if I walked by someone's desk and they had *twelve* encouragement cards after they preached, that bugged me . . . even though I said, "That's great! Be encouraged!" But if they only got *two* to my *eight*, I liked that.

Human encouragements are usually based on another's *discouragement*. They're competitive. To be a winner, someone else must lose.

So I try to love, but secretly I hate. How? Well, I want their sermon to bomb and Jesus to be poorly preached. That is, I *hate* them and I *hate* God when at the same time I'm desperately trying to love my neighbor and love God *most—best*. All that can be pretty discouraging when you get a good look at it.

Discouragement,
 Addiction,
 Enslavement,
 Fear,
 Hatred,
 Shame,
 Lies.

I remember affirmation times at summer camp. We would all sit in a circle and one after another affirm the designated affirmer. I now know that everyone secretly, desperately, wanted affirmation like a drug . . . and everyone sat in silent terror . . . and everyone wanted to be the best encourager so they'd be encouraged most for all their encouraging.

So the first person would say, “You have great hair and you’re so sweet.” And the next would say, “You’re so sweet and really, really cool and have great hair too.” And the next person would top the encouragement until by the end it would be, “You’re so sweet and really cool and nice, and words can’t express my admiration,” and they had just *met* . . . and now were lying through their teeth in the name of Jesus. And I was responsible for all these sins. I was the youth pastor making them do it.

Fear,
 Competition,
 Lies . . .
 Lies kill.

I had a friend who volunteered with our old youth group. He wanted to be a pastor, and I wanted to be a great encourager, so I encouraged him. I didn’t think it was his gifting or calling, but I didn’t tell him. I don’t think anybody told him. We all wanted to encourage him.

He went through seminary, married, got a job in a church . . . (People are more honest about your gifts when they’re paying your salary.) My friend lost his job, lost his mind, lost his wife, lost courage. And I bet Satan used my warm and fuzzy encouragements, because those encouragements were lies.

Church can easily become a house of warm and fuzzy lies and addicts manipulating praise.

My friend’s job failed, yet I may still be the biggest failure, for perhaps I’m still addicted and filled with fear, and there is “no fear in love.” If I don’t love, I am nothing.

But now the Bible still says, “Encourage one another.”

- How do you encourage someone who has very few talents and abilities (at least that you can see)?
- How do you encourage someone addicted to encouragements?
- How do you encourage a meathead without making him more of a meathead?
- How do you encourage a moron, a loser, a failure, a jerk?
- How do you encourage a prodigal son in total rebellion? Do you say, “Good job”?
- How do you encourage a daughter in prostitution?
- How do you encourage someone whose good works are “as filthy rags”?
- How do you encourage someone “dead in their trespasses and sins,” whose heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt above all things?
- How do you encourage a dead thing? “Gosh, you’re pretty good for dead.”
- In other words, how do you encourage a human being?

Scripture says, “Jesus didn’t entrust himself to men, for he knew what was in man.” According to Scripture we ourselves alone are filthy, dead, wretched losers who can’t be trusted. And we are to be encouraged . . . *how?*

I looked for warm, fuzzy words of encouragement and praise from Jesus for people's accomplishments, but . . .

To the Pharisees: "Woe to you, blind guides, hypocrites, white-washed tombs."

To the Jews: "You are of your father the Devil."

To His disciples: "Oh faithless generation, how long am I to be with you?"

To the woman at the well: "Yeah, you're right in saying you have no husband, for you have had five, and the one you're with now isn't your husband."

Looking at Peter: "Get behind me, Satan."

I wonder if everybody always felt encouraged by Jesus (Mr. Warm and Fuzzy). I wonder what Jesus would say on summer camp affirmation night.

Someone would say: "Gosh, I like your hair, and you're so sweet.

Then Jesus: "You are of your father the Devil."

I wonder what Jesus would write on my encouragement card.

Maybe instead of encouragement cards we should have discouragement cards with Exodus 20:16: "Thou shalt not bear false witness." Or we could have humility cards, and you could write, "Your hair sucks, and you tick me off!" Maybe that would give us more courage. Is I Thessalonians 5 wrong?

How do you encourage a meathead like me?

One Sunday I walked home between services. This day I was getting a good fix: lots of encouragement and lots of stress. I walked in the back door, and my three-year-old son yelled, "Daddy! Daddy!" He ran up to me, wrapped his arms around me, and said, "I love you!" and I thought, "This is it. This is better than 1700 sermon affirmation cards. This gives me courage." Why? Jon didn't have a clue about what I did. So he didn't hug me for what I did but for who he was. It was his nature.

Little boys hug their dads (good dads or bad dads) because it's their nature. They don't hug them on merit; it's 100% grace.

I really did nothing to deserve it, and I hugged Jon, and *he* did nothing to deserve it. In that way Jon can't blow it. There is nothing he can do to make me stop loving him. But that's all just a shadow—a transient picture—of another love.

I took Elizabeth to the doctor for her six-year-old check-up. She sat on the table swinging her legs, and this young doctor, trying to be encouraging, said, "Elizabeth, tell me what you like

about yourself.” Elizabeth looked at me with her big, brown eyes and said, “I like being with my Daddy.” And the doctor said, “*No*, I mean what do you like about *you* . . . you know, like that you can run fast.” Elizabeth looked confused and said, “Well, I like that I run fast.”

I wanted to shut the doctor’s head in a drawer.

My daughter’s legs are transient, and I highly doubt she’s going to win every race. Someone will always be faster, and she could be crippled one day. No matter what, one day she’ll die; one day the legs will fail, but love will not fail, and my love is only a faint shadow of the Father’s love.

If she gets her identity from her legs, she’ll be discouraged unto death. If she gets her identity by abiding in the Father’s love, she’ll be encouraged unto life.

How did Jesus encourage?

- To a Pharisee he said, “For the Father God so loved the world he gave his only son.”
- To the woman at the well, “If you ask I’ll give you living water.”
- To the prostitute, “Neither do I condemn you.”
- To the prodigal, “The father gave a ring, robe, and shoes, and a party.”
- To the Jews, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
- To His disciples, “You will all fall away, but this is my body given to you, and this is my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

He encourages us with the Father’s love, which is grace purchased with His own blood.

That night at the table He said, “In this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer.” Why? — because you run fast? No . . . “because I have overcome the world. This is the victory which overcomes the world, our faith.” Our faith in Christ, the love of God for wretches like me.

What would Jesus write on Peter Hiett’s encouragement card? “Golly, I’m so impressed! You are so talented! Where on earth did you ever get talent like that? That third point . . . I never *thought* of that.” *No*. It would be more like this: “My body for you, Peter. My blood is shed for you. I love you. And by the way, Peter, I will build my church on this rock. Yes, I may use your confession, but *I* will build it.”

This is my point: Jesus encourages us not for what we have done but for what He has done for us. What we have done is death, the work of the flesh energized by law. What He has done is life, the work of His Spirit, and it is grace. How does Jesus build self-esteem? Is it by finding all the positives in my self? Or by crucifying my self and giving me a new self which is not my self but *Himself*? Like Paul I can say, “It’s no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.”

Jesus encourages us with the Father's grace
By the power of His Spirit at the expense of His own blood,
While we often encourage flesh according to the law
And feed an addiction called pride, death, and hell.

I Thessalonians 5:11: "Therefore encourage . . ." (in Greek: "parakaleo"; Jesus *is* the "Parakletos"—the encourager, comforter, counselor) or, "Therefore ["Jesufy"] one another."

And wherever there's a "therefore" we must ask what it's there for . . .

I Thessalonians 5:9-10: "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage ["Jesufy"] one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. "

"Be encouraged, Thessalonians, not because you run fast, or because you are so inherently spiffy, but because Jesus died for you (body and blood for you) to save you from wrath and to save you from your selves."

So let me discourage your self and encourage you—the *new* you; mortify the flesh and encourage the spirit.

- Some of you run . . . but you're not the fastest runner in the world, and soon you'll be dead. Your legs will turn to dust.
- Some of you paint . . . but you'll never be famous in this world. You don't have what it takes; others are more skilled.
- Some of you preach . . . but you'll just tick people off or bore them, and there are others more skilled than you or me.

But listen closely: Come to this table, and no one is loved more than you . . . not even God. Did you hear me? That night at the table Jesus prayed, "Father, you have loved them even as you have loved me." He cannot love you more. There is no more love to earn, children.

Perfect love is your Father's nature. Abide in it; dwell in His love.

Sing because of His love; then listen closely: *You* are the best singer in the world . . . tied for first place with all His other children.

Run because you love Him, and you are the best runner . . . tied for first place with all His other children.

Paint because of His love, and you are the best painter in the world . . . tied for first place with all His other children. The best painters in my world are my children, when they paint for the love of me.

Dwell in His love and preach because of His love, and you are the best preacher in the world . . . tied for first place with all His other children.

You still may not get a job in a church (like my friend), and it still may not be your gifting for building the Church, but it doesn't matter. It's not the place you get your courage but a way you express your love. Get your courage—your identity—your life—from the Gift-giver.

Jesus is your courage.
Jesus is your life.
Jesus is your new self.

And now a sermon like this is awkward, because you don't know what to say afterward . . .

“Nice sermon . . . but I know it wasn't you . . . you're a turd.”

“Lousy sermon, but I know it wasn't you . . . it was God's fault, I guess.”

Very quickly let me say: Encouraging the use of a gift is different from encouraging a person. I'm not my gifts; you're not your gifts. Probably many of those old cards were very good. The problem wasn't the cards but my addiction—my idolatry—trusting the gifts rather than the Gift-giver, getting courage from my talents rather than from God.

We need to give feedback for nurturing gifts and talents. It really helps to hear, “Peter, God used that sermon.” That encourages me to use my gift, because something *else* encourages me to live.

So back to our question: How do you encourage a meathead without making him more of a meathead? How do you nurture the spirit rather than enable an addiction? How do you encourage what God has done and not what flesh is doing?

I think the best way is prayer. Pray for people. And ask God, “How do you love them? What is your Gospel—your Word—for them?” Then speak God's Word of love for them: *Jesus*. God saves.

“The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19). “Prophecy is given to encourage [“Jesufy”] the brethren” (I Corinthians 14). When you testify to Jesus in a person's life, you speak prophetically and you encourage.

There are people who pray for me and then speak Jesus to me. And when they encourage me, they set me free from my addiction, because they remind me: “Peter, look what God has done, and Peter, look what God has done in *you* and even *through you!*” And when I realize it's truly God, I marvel at God's grace . . . because I know I'm a meathead, and so I have courage. I'm not enslaved to their opinion, because they're not speaking just their opinion. It's often a Scripture; it's Gospel; it's the gracious opinion of God.

The opinion of God does not change. And He has already died for you, paid for your failure, and given you His victory.

I'm free. I'm not enslaved to changing public opinion; I'm liberated with the gracious, eternal opinion of God.

So don't encourage with *your* opinion but *God's* opinion. How do you encourage a meathead?
— With the good news of God's grace through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ken Davis tells about a girl in one of his groups, a teenager who ran away to Los Angeles, headed for total disaster, on the edge of a terrifying life of prostitution. She lay in an alley beaten by the man who insisted he be her pimp. Now, how do you encourage someone like that? "Oh, everybody makes mistakes; you're really a nice whore."

Beaten and bloodied, lying in the alley, she decided to make a phone call. It was a phone call to her parents, and it saved her life. Later Ken Davis asked her, "What gave you the strength or the courage to make that call?" She said:

I cheated and lied to my parents for two years before I ran away from home. Mom would try so hard to get through to me, but I treated her like dirt. Almost every day my mother would tell me that she loved me. She would say to me, "There's nothing you can do to make me stop loving you."

I never gave her the satisfaction of knowing that her words were getting through. After running away I would hear those words in every quiet moment. After being beaten senseless by the man who wanted to be my pimp, I was lying in a filthy alley ashamed and beyond hope. My drugged and beaten brain could only handle one thought and that thought was this: "There is nothing you can do that will make me stop loving you." I picked up the phone and called my mom. I may have given up on myself, but there was hope that she had not given up on me.

On the night Jesus was betrayed and the disciples gave up on Him, Jesus took bread and broke it saying, "This is my body given for you." After supper He took the cup saying, "This is the new covenant in my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you."

Children, there is nothing you can do to make God stop loving you.

Remember this: If you want courage, come to this table and see "what God has done"; then eat and drink, and "what God has done" is in you; and see "what God has done in you."

Encouragement cards are great. But do better — "'Jesufy'" one another. In the name of Jesus, come to the table and be encouraged. Amen.

You are sanctified meatheads by the grace of the living God. Jesus is the Word of love from God the Father. Every time you speak to a person, you can dispense Jesus. That's amazing! You are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood" to dispense Jesus—the love of God. Be encouraged! Amen.

Further Reading

But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

-I Thessalonians 5:8-11

Think of a little child that is given drugs. As the drugs penetrate the body of the child, it becomes addicted; its whole being cries out for the drug. To be without the drug is so unbearable a torment that it seems preferable to die. Think of that image—the body has gotten addicted to the drug. Now this is exactly what your society did to you when you were born. You were not allowed to enjoy the solid, nutritious food of life—namely, work, play, fun, laughter, the company of people, the pleasures of the senses and the mind. You were given a taste for the drug called approval, appreciation, attention. . . . So you became cravenly dependent on others and you lost your freedom. Others now have the power to make you happy or miserable. You crave your drugs, but as much as you hate the suffering that it involves, you find yourself completely helpless. There is never a minute when, consciously or unconsciously, you are not aware of or attuned to the reactions of others, marching to the beat of their drum. . . . When you are in this state of dependency, you always have to be on your best behavior; you can never let your hair down; you have to live up to expectations. To be with people is to live in tension. To be without them brings the agony of loneliness, because you miss them. You have lost your capacity to see them exactly as they are and to respond to them accurately, because your perception of them is clouded by the need to get your drugs. You see them insofar as they are a support for getting your drug or a threat to have your drug removed. You're always looking at people, consciously or unconsciously, through these eyes. Will I get what I want from them, will I not get what I want from them? And if they can neither support nor threaten my drug, I'm not interested in them. That's a horrible thing to say, but I wonder if there's anyone here of whom this cannot be said.

-Anthony De Mello

The LORD of hosts has purposed it, to defile the pride of all glory, to dishonor all the honored of the earth.

-Isaiah 23:9

How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

-John 5:44

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.

-II Corinthians 3:4-6

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

-Galatians 2:20

When a man or woman is truly honest (not just working at it), it is virtually impossible to insult them personally. There is nothing to insult. Those who were truly ready for the kingdom were just such people. Their inner poverty of spirit and rigorous honesty had set them free. They were people who had nothing to be proud of.

-Brennan Manning

“These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor [Encourager], the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

-John 14:25-27

As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever

and ever. Amen.

-1 Peter 4:10-11

“The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.”

-John 17:22-23

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. . . . And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

-Revelation 21:9-11, 23

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