

Encouragement

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Introduction.

- A. Before I move into the meat of this lesson, I wanted to take a moment to discuss some of the concerns and questions that I've heard people raise about our service groups in general. First of all, these groups are not meant to comprehensively list every kind of service a Christian can engage in. There are members of this congregation doing things outside the assembly right now that don't appear in any group. If that's you, don't feel guilty because your particular niche isn't group-sanctioned. Just keep doing what you're doing.
- B. Second, if your particular niche IS something that a group is going to start doing, rest assured: we are NOT going to ask you to stop doing what you're doing. The whole point of this exercise is to put Christians to work, not bar them from working! If there is some overlap, I would encourage you to join the relevant group, just because I think that will make your work easier, but if you don't want to join, that's fine too.
- C. Third, if you see more than one group you want to join, that's entirely acceptable. For that matter, if you want to join all six groups, you can certainly do that. I would encourage some caution in that, though. Remember, the point here is not to serve for two weeks and then quit. It's to make some work for the Lord a part of our lives. If we don't bite off more than we can chew by signing up for everything, we're more likely to keep at it.
- D. This morning, though, I want to zero in on only one group: the encouragement group. Encouragement is a significant part of the Christian experience, as Paul reveals in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. However, if we're not careful, as with many things that we're supposed to do, encouragement can fade into the background unless we emphasize it. Let's create that emphasis this morning. Let's delve into Biblical encouragement.

I. Definition and Importance.

- A. I guess it's the lawyer in me, but just about every time I preach a sermon on a word, I want to start by pulling its **DEFINITION** from somewhere in Scripture. In the case of "encouragement," we see a pretty good definition in Acts 11:23. This verse describes Barnabas, and his work with the first Gentile Christians in Antioch. He encouraged them by saying uplifting things to them so that they would resolutely remain faithful to the Lord. On our own, we might think of all kinds of things we could encourage another Christian to do, but this kind of encouragement, of persuading someone to persevere in serving God, is the kind most discussed in Scripture. If we engage in this kind of encouragement, we can be confident we're doing what God wants.
- B. This might seem like a very low bar to set. After all, Christians are supposed to do a lot more than just not fall away. However, the **IMPORTANCE** of encouragement is also well explained in Scripture. Take, for instance, what Hebrews 3:13 says on the subject. It tells us that we are to encourage one another, not occasionally, not even weekly, but daily. That alone is enough to tell us how significant encouragement is. After all, just about everything we do daily is vitally important to our continued well-being. We eat daily because if we don't, our body starts becoming impaired through lack of nourishment. We sleep daily because that's the only way to keep our minds functioning at top efficiency. In a similar vein, we encourage one another daily because if we don't, some of us will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Remember, friends, the devil stalks about like a roaring lion when it comes to trial, but when it comes to temptation, he typically prefers to be much more subtle. He doesn't go around hanging up neon signs over our temptations that say, "If you do this, you'll lose your soul!" Instead, he lures us in, bit by bit, with baby steps on the road to destruction. He deceives us into believing that the bad choices we're making won't matter. If we follow Satan's will in this, we will become hardened. We will come to believe that sin, and not righteousness, is what is going to make us happy in this life, and we stop caring about what will happen in the next life. That's what encouragement aims to prevent.
- C. Now, we might think that only new, weak Christians are in need of this kind of encouragement. We might think that preachers, elders, and others who have served the Lord faithfully for decades no longer need to be exhorted to remain faithful to God. Friends, that's a foolish assumption, and through the centuries, it has cost who knows how many mature Christians their souls. The truth is, we all need to be encouraged. Look, for instance, at the attitude that the apostle Paul reveals in Romans 1:11-12. In context, Paul is discussing why he wants to go to Rome to see the Christians there. He wants to impart spiritual gifts to them, which is something only an apostle could do, but he also sees it as a valuable opportunity for encouragement. Not only does he hope to encourage the Romans, but he also hopes that the Romans will encourage him. Think about that, folks. This is the apostle Paul we're talking about. He was one of the three most famous people in the entire New Testament, a Christian who constantly risked his life for the Lord, a servant of God who most likely died for the cause of Christ. And yet, the apostle Paul still needed encouragement. Friends, if Paul needed encouragement, each one of us certainly does too, and we need it on a regular, consistent basis. That's why this is one of our groups—encouragement is a spiritually vital task from which all Christians need to benefit.

II. Forms of Encouragement.

- A. As we consider this important topic in God's word, we soon see that there are a number of forms that encouragement can take. The first is the encouragement that is present in **THE ASSEMBLY**. The Hebrews writer discusses this in Hebrews 10:24-25. This passage tells us that as we come together as a church, we are to encourage one another, and additionally stir one another up to love and good works. All of us who are regular churchgoers can testify to the power that the assembly has to encourage. When we sing hymns together about God, His love for us, and His plan for us to be saved, that naturally inspires us to draw closer to Him. When we study the passages of Scripture that urge us to good behavior and warn us of the consequences of evil, that naturally moves us to seek the good and shun the bad. Even the visiting that we do after services can be a very encouraging time. That's when we greet our brothers and sisters, learn about their lives recently, and take courage from the fact that they so obviously care about us.
- B. Clearly, the assembly is a powerfully encouraging force in our lives, and the more we take advantage of our opportunities to assemble, the more encouraged we will be. Sadly, however, none of us are here all the time. Sometimes we're prevented from being here by illness or work or travel, and sometimes Christians who can assemble just choose not to. Remember: an isolated Christian is a vulnerable Christian, likely in need of encouragement. That's why the Scripture reveals a number of ways we can encourage outside the assembly.
- C. Perhaps most prominently along these lines, the Scripture reveals that **VISITS** can be very encouraging. We see one such visit described in 1 Thessalonians 3:2. Paul knew that the church in Thessalonica needed encouragement, so he sent Timothy to make sure that they received the exhortation they needed. This is certainly a pattern that we can follow, and we don't even have to travel long distances to do it. Imagine how meaningful it would be for someone who wants to assemble with the saints but can't to have another Christian drop by sometime during the week and spend a few minutes talking about spiritual things. That would be the sort of thing to give us the spiritual fuel to get through the rest of the week.
- D. Likewise, **LETTERS** can also be a useful tool for encouragement. We learn this from Acts 15:30-31. In this case, the letter under discussion was the letter sent from the Jerusalem council to Gentile Christians in Antioch, informing them that they didn't have to keep the Law of Moses to please God. It's easy to see why first-century Christians would have found that letter encouraging, but the notes we send don't have to be so doctrinal. There's nothing wrong with passing along a couple of Scripture citations to an absent Christian, but it's just as useful to send a letter make or a phone call that's nothing more than an expression of love.
- E. This is true because Scripturally speaking, even a **SIGN OF CONCERN** is encouraging. Look at how Paul words Colossians 2:1-2. He wants the church in Colossae to know about his labor for them, because he knew that the simple fact of Paul's conflict on their behalf would encourage them to stay faithful. The same is true today, friends. We can spout Scripture at other Christians until we're blue in the face, but sometimes the very best thing that we can do to encourage is to show them that we love them and that we care about them.
- F. These three Scriptural tools, visits, letters, and signs of concern, are the focus of our **ENCOURAGEMENT GROUP**, which, as we've mentioned before, is led by John Hamon. Its purpose is to make sure that we're using those tools as fully as we should be. Here's how the group is going to work:
1. **Group leader creates a list of all group members absent on Sunday.** This is going to be John's job. I'd imagine that after Sunday evening services, he's going to go through and compile a list of all those who weren't there that Lord's day, with the reason for their absence if he knows it.
 2. **Group leader relays list to group members.** Once again, this is John's job. I'd imagine that he's going to call everybody in the group on Monday night and let each of them know who wasn't there.
 3. **Each group member chooses one absent member to encourage.** This is the part where group members have to do something. After each group member hears the list, he decides which of the Christians on that list are the ones he personally wants to encourage. Notice once again that nobody's being assigned anything. Nobody's doing anything they don't want to. Our elders and deacons have very carefully designed this process so that if you aren't there and hear from a member of the encouragement group, it's because they specifically wanted to encourage you, because they loved you and wanted to help. Notice also that it's up to each group member how they want to encourage. They can visit, they can write, they can call, or they can encourage in whatever other way presents itself.
- G. That's basically what the encouragement group is going to do. As with all of the other groups, it's going to be volunteer only. Here, though, are some **REASONS** why you might want to sign up on the sheet in the back.
1. **Limited time commitment.** Obviously, you can take as long to encourage as you want to, but a member of this group could discharge his responsibilities in only about 15 minutes a week. That makes this a good choice for people who are on the go all the time and don't have chunks of time to spare.
 2. **Requires little mobility.** Some of us don't get around as well as we used to, but you don't have to get around very well at all to drop a card in the mail. This group is a good choice for people in poor health.
 3. **Opportunity to express love to people you love.** This idea, friends, is at the heart of the encouragement group. It's a chance to let other Christians know you care about them.

Conclusion. In order to share in the work of the Lord, though, you must be one of His children.