



Lesson 1 Encourage

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift....And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...

(Ephesians 4:7, 11-12).

If we wish to have an impact for Christ's body, the church, we must first keep proper perspective of how we are to go about ministering to others. And the first lesson to learn is that we are to be about the business of building up the body of Christ. Our work is to be the work of encouraging our brothers and sisters to grow in the faith.

Keeping this perspective is harder to do than we may think. Our tendency is to fix things, to set them right, or rather to set people right. And if we are bothered by our brother's behavior, our reaction is to put the offender in his place. There are times when stern correction is needed, and we may very well have to criticize someone, even speak sharply. The point is that if my goal is to build you up in Christ, then that very attitude will give me the wisdom needed to truly help you. It will at least curb my hastiness to speak words that make problems worse.

If I remember that the goal is to build up the offender, then I will think and act in such a way that the offender has not only been corrected, but has benefited from it and is positively motivated to improve. The following messages address the specifics of how to accomplish this, but it cannot be accomplished without the right attitude. Indeed, the tips I will be giving could turn into forms of manipulation, rather than instruments of building another up in Christ.

As the Executive Minister of a large church, my responsibility includes addressing mistakes and problems caused by staff, church leaders, and ministry leaders. Perhaps one ministry intrudes on the space of another ministry; maybe a staff member fails to carry out a task that is especially needed; or a leader speaks in an offensive manner. I then have to address the offense. How I choose to address the issue and speak to the individual will determine if a brother is built up and becomes more responsible or is torn down and becomes even more troublesome.



Space is a common problem at Tenth, being a large church in a relatively small space. Let's say one ministry has booked a particular room only to find another ministry inappropriately using it. Such a scenario could well result in some kind of confrontation and hurt feelings. Even if the offended ministry leader handles the situation graciously, the offender still needs to be corrected. I may have to reprimand the offender, particularly if this has been a pattern or the offender shows no regret. But if my concern is that he be built up, then I will approach him in such a way that demonstrates such a desire. If I can do that – if I can convey to him that I am for him (for his good) – then I will have won over a brother who will have learned from his mistakes and be productive for the kingdom. If I, instead, convey only my displeasure, then I will have lost a brother who will leave the church or drop out of ministry or become more troublesome in the future.

Let your operating word be to encourage. Remember Jesus Christ, the servant who would not break a bruised reed; and that should be an apt description for each one of us. Your brother in Christ is bruised by sin – his own and the sins committed against him. Your sister is wounded by hurts experienced both in the world and in the church. Each one is acting out in some degree from woundedness. Our Christian family members get pounded by the world – pounded with temptation, with mockery, with direct and indirect opposition to their faith. And worse, they often get beat about by the church and fellow believers who sin against them and reprimand them, and, like the Pharisees, impose standards on them. Then there are their own failures that taunt them – from shameful sin to embarrassing deficiencies that get them into trouble. It is out of these sins and wounds that they operate in the church and even carry on ministry, thus leading to their offenses. This is not an excuse of their offenses; rather, it is a call to consider the burdens of our brothers and sisters, and to follow our Lord's example of coming alongside them to heal, not wound; to build up, not tear down.

We are to be about the business of building up, of encouraging the body members of Jesus Christ. And we are to do it in love. Remember our Lord's commandment of what is to be the identifying mark of his disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, *if you have love for one another*" (John 13:34-35).



Consider further Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4:15: "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him which is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

Put Christ's commandment and Paul's instruction together and the following message is clear: we do not have the right to speak the truth to one another if we do not speak it in love. This means that we may not correct or instruct another believer if our aim is not for his or her good. There is a sense in which speaking the truth is speaking in love (as will be addressed in the next message). Even so, much of our so-called truth speaking rises out of our own sinful motivations (pride, resentment, anger, ambition...) rather than out of true love for our brother or sister. To be good encouragers, we must be better examiners of our own hearts than of others. That's why Scripture instructs us not to speak hastily and to be few with words.

I should make clear that I do not equate encouragement with mere positive thinking. If a person comes to me pouring out his heart over his failures and shortcomings, I am ready enough to agree with his assessment. One ought to be honest about such things and I never minimize sin. However, it is also necessary to see the positive in a person and his situation. Thus, it is appropriate to point out and to commend a person's willingness to confess personal sin, since that is evidence of the Holy Spirit working in him. Indeed, he is in a better condition than the mere positive thinking fellow who is blind to his pride and obvious sins.

Now to make that statement is to speak the truth, and helpful because it enables the sin-laden brother to have hope that God is working in him. What else might I make note of? He comes to me troubled by a besetting sin. I may observe that while he struggles with that particular sin, there are other areas in his life that are positive. He may struggle with temper, and yet is quite compassionate; he may be addicted to one sin, but has self control over another. He needs to hear these things so that he will not despair that he is beyond help.

I will always make sure that he hears the encouraging word of grace. I remember an out-of-town visitor dropping in my study after checking himself out of a clinic which



supposedly was treating him for addiction to pornography. He had an obsessive-compulsive disorder to go along with the addiction. The clinic's method of treatment was to inundate him with pornography. I don't know enough to comment on such methods, but I understood his decision to leave. Anyhow, he dropped by to speak to a pastor before heading back home, and he asked the question, "Will I ever be healed?" I answered truthfully that I did not know, but I added this greater truth: "Isn't it wonderful to know that we don't have to be healed to be accepted by God?"

This is the encouraging news of the gospel. Jesus has won for us reconciliation with God; it is his righteousness that covers us, however messed up we may be through the sin that has corrupted our flesh and encumbered us. I know that if I can get that encouraging word through to the one who desponds, then there is hope for progress over his temptations and weaknesses. That son of God on that day needed to hear his Father had not rejected him, that Christ still called him brother. He needed to hear that as terrible as his struggle may be, grace still abounded for him. With such knowledge, he could more ably face the future and fight his sin.

The battle against sin is lifelong, and it encompasses every aspect of life and every aspect of church life. All the more then we need to sharpen our skills at bearing with one another so that we may hold one another up. We have a common goal to grow in full maturity in Jesus Christ. We have a common obligation to help each other get there by building up the body of Christ.