

Strengthening Others in Their Faith

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“I’m not sure what to say when someone is struggling.” “What if my attempts at encouragement fall flat?” “How can I be supportive without seeming fake?” If these thoughts have crossed your mind when faced with a discouraged fellow believer, you’re not alone. Many Christians feel uncertain about how to effectively encourage others, especially in difficult circumstances. We want to help, but the right words often seem elusive.

Yet encouragement isn’t an optional add-on to the Christian life—it’s a vital ministry that every believer is called to practice. The early church leader Barnabas was so effective at this that the apostles nicknamed him “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4:36). His ministry of strengthening others’ faith was so valuable that it became his defining characteristic. The good news is that encouragement isn’t a mysterious spiritual gift possessed by only a select few—it’s a skill that any Christian can develop with practice and intentionality.

The Biblical Foundation for Encouragement

The Bible doesn’t treat encouragement as a nice-but-unnecessary social pleasantry. Instead, it’s presented as an essential spiritual practice:

“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thess 5:11).

“But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb 3:13).

The Greek word most commonly translated as “encourage” in the New Testament is *parakaleo*, which literally means “to call alongside.” It carries connotations of comforting, exhorting, strengthening, and advocating for someone. Jesus himself exemplified this kind of encouragement throughout his ministry, consistently calling people to their highest potential while meeting them exactly where they were.

Practical Ways to Encourage Others

Let’s explore some specific, actionable ways to become more like Barnabas in our spheres of influence:

1. Be present and attentive

Sometimes the most powerful encouragement requires no words at all—just your attentive presence. Job’s friends started well when they simply sat with him in silence for seven days (Job 2:13). It was only when they began offering explanations and solutions that they became “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2).

Try this: When someone shares a struggle, resist the urge to immediately offer advice or solutions. Instead, make eye contact, listen fully, and respond with genuine empathy. A simple “That sounds really difficult. I’m here with you in this” can be more encouraging than the most eloquent advice.

2. Speak Scripture thoughtfully

God’s Word has unique power to encourage, but there’s an art to sharing it effectively. Randomly quoting verses without context or sensitivity can come across as dismissive of someone’s real pain. Instead, share Scripture that you’ve found personally meaningful in similar situations.

Tim Keller puts it well: “Don’t just recite verses; share how God’s Word has been a light in your own darkness. This makes Scripture feel less like a prescription and more like bread that has nourished you and can nourish them too.”

3. Acknowledge growth and progress

Many Christians are much harder on themselves than God is. They see only their failures while missing evidence of God’s work in their lives. Be the person who notices and celebrates spiritual growth, even when it’s subtle.

“I’ve noticed how you’re becoming more patient with your children.” “The way you responded to that criticism shows real spiritual maturity.” “I remember where you were a year ago in your faith, and I’m amazed at how God has been working in you.”

4. Write personal notes

In our digital age, a handwritten note of encouragement has become increasingly precious. The apostle Paul regularly wrote letters to strengthen believers and churches—and these epistles continue to encourage us today. Your words may not become Scripture, but they might be saved and re-read for years to come.

Bible teacher Jen Wilkin practices what she calls “strategic encouragement”—intentionally writing notes to people who might not regularly receive affirmation, highlighting specific character qualities or acts of service she’s observed.

5. Pray with and for others

Few things are more encouraging than knowing someone is bringing your needs before God. When appropriate, pray with people on the spot rather than just promising to pray later. And when you do pray later, consider sending a brief message letting them know you've fulfilled that promise.

As author Paul Miller notes, "Praying for someone in their presence creates a bond and communicates a level of care that goes beyond words alone."

6. Remind people of God's character and promises

When faith wavers, one of the most powerful forms of encouragement is gently redirecting focus from circumstances to God's unchanging nature. This was Moses' approach when Joshua faced battle: he didn't deny the challenge but shifted Joshua's attention to God's faithfulness and presence (Josh 1:5-9).

Try this: Help discouraged believers identify which aspect of God's character they most need to remember in their current situation. Is it His sovereignty? His compassion? His wisdom? His power to redeem? As they reconnect with these truths, courage often returns.

Growing as an Encourager

Like any spiritual discipline, encouragement gets easier and more natural with practice. Here are some ways to develop this ministry in your life:

1. **Start small:** Begin by offering encouragement to one person each day. Look for specific, genuine qualities or actions to affirm.
2. **Study the great encouragers:** Read through Acts and notice how Barnabas encouraged others. Look at how Jesus strengthened his disciples' faith even when correcting them.
3. **Ask God for discernment:** Pray for wisdom to know when someone needs gentle comfort and when they need loving exhortation. Different situations call for different approaches.
4. **Keep a record:** Consider keeping a journal of how God has encouraged you through Scripture, circumstances, and other people. This creates a reservoir to draw from when encouraging others.
5. **Find your authentic style:** Effective encouragement flows from your unique personality and gifts. Some encourage through humor, others through deep conversations, still others through acts of service. Discover and develop your natural encouragement style.

Remember that encouragement isn't about having all the answers or saying perfect things. It's about coming alongside others on their journey of faith, sharing both their burdens and their joys, and consistently pointing them toward the God who is always at work in them. In a world full of

critics and commentators, choose to be a Barnabas—a son or daughter of encouragement who strengthens others' faith and helps them take their next step toward Christ.