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Marshall Segal July 6, 2021

When was the last time you felt meaningfully encouraged by another believer?

Many of us may be able to quickly call to mind a conversation, maybe even from the past week. Others may struggle to remember a distinct moment we felt encouraged. Some will feel they have experienced godly encouragement when they haven't. Others will assume they have *not* experienced godly encouragement when they actually have. Perhaps many of us fail to experience and extend encouragement because we don't yet know what encouragement *is*.

The way we often use *encouragement* today, it could mean mere comfort or affirmation. "You did a great job on that project." "You're a very good mother." "Everything's going to be okay." But biblical encouragement, though often rich with affirmation, offers something far stronger and more invigorating. While poor encouragement may inflame pride or coddle self-pity, real encouragement cultivates humility, courage, and, above all, hope in God. While poor encouragement might justify passivity, real encouragement inspires fresh vigilance and faithfulness.

True encouragement is not about making others feel better about themselves, but preparing them to know, obey, and enjoy more of God.

Encouragement or Flattery?

Affirmation alone is not encouragement. In fact, it might just be flattery in sheep's clothes. And flattery poisons what encouragement nurtures.

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"A man who flatters his neighbor," says Proverbs 29:5, "spreads a net for his feet." Or even more severely, "A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin" (Proverbs 26:28). Flattery is not sweet or harmless; it ruins souls. It is pleasant makeup on ruthless selfishness. Its effect is not loving, but ruinous. Cultivating a habit or culture of true encouragement may begin with taking more seriously the severity of God's warnings about flattery.

The apostle Paul hated flattery (1 Thessalonians 2:5), because he had tasted the bitter and divisive fruit of flattery. "Such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites,

and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive" (Romans 16:18). The flatterer uses other people's insecurities to serve his own cravings for approval, for power and influence, and in some cases for financial gain or illicit sex. Flattery is a subtly aggressive strategy for indulging some idolatry. And it preys on the naive — on those who think flattery is sweet or harmless. Ironically, flattery can deceive and ruin the flatterer by making even him believe himself loving.

So, what sets true encouragement apart from its dangerous counterpart?

How Does God Encourage Someone?

God not only gives us instructions and examples of good encouragement in Scripture, but he also stoops down himself to show us how to encourage a human heart. When Moses died, right as Israel was about to cross into the Promised Land, God appointed Joshua to lead the people against nations mightier and more fearsome than his own. One can hardly imagine a more intimidating calling. The Lord comes to *encourage* — literally, to impart strength and *courage* — to Joshua,

> *Be strong and courageous*, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only *be strong and very courageous*, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. . . . Have I not commanded you? *Be strong and courageous*. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:6–7, 9)

This is encouragement in a finer, more penetrating, more compelling form. So, what sets these words apart from flattery?

Tells the Truth

First, true encouragement tells the truth. Flattery typically exaggerates an aspect of the truth, twisting or inflating it for selfish reasons. Encouragement knows it can only be as fruitful as it is faithful. We know God is telling the truth to Joshua, because he *cannot* lie (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2). When he says, "You shall cause this people to inherit the land," we know it will happen exactly as he has said. So, when we encourage, do we resist the temptation to hide what might hurt or to say more than is really true?

The flatterer wants to gratify the pride and vanity of his victim, so he isolates admirable qualities and exaggerates them — he makes good work sound excellent, small sacrifices sound like great ones, little fruit sound like a garden bursting with life — all while refusing to identify and confront sin and error. *Or* he takes ugly qualities and makes them seem

admirable — making selfishness sound like self-care, pride like self-confidence, anger like passion, greed like ambition, dishonesty like love.

The godly encourager, by contrast, speaks the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). He knows the spiritual danger of pride, so as he affirms, he takes care to not indulge or stimulate it in others. He commends what is commendable without feeling the need to exaggerate. He also doesn't overlook or excuse sin, but confronts, forgives, and restores from the same love with which he affirms. Over time, consistent encouragement without any correction may not be telling the whole truth.

Aims at Obedience

Second, true encouragement aims at obedience to God. "Only be strong and very courageous, *being careful to do according to all the law* that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left." This kind of encouragement is not merely about standing up to opposition or overcoming fears, but about trusting and obeying all that God says.

> "There is a world of difference — a universe of difference — between 'You can do this' and 'God will be with you.'"

Paul prays for the same kind of encouragement when he writes, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father . . . comfort your hearts and establish them *in every good work and word*" (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17). Flattery doesn't inspire love for God and his word because it overflows from a heart in love with self. So, does our encouragement bear the fruit of difficult obedience in every good work and word? Is the encouragement we receive helping us defy temptation and pick up our cross again today?

Strengthens Hope in God

Third, true encouragement strengthens hope in God, not in self. "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for *the Lord your God* is with you wherever you go." Flattery makes God seem nice but unnecessary. It turns the sovereign Author and Sustainer of all things into a cheerleader for our self-sufficiency.

There is a world of difference — a *universe* of difference — between "You can do this" and "God will be with you." And yet how often does our encouragement fall more in line with the former? How often do we accentuate what *we* have done or can do, rather than taking refuge in what God has promised to do for and through us because of Christ? Real encouragement says, "Apart from him you can do *nothing* — but he will be with you wherever you go."

Do you want to test the encouragement you give and receive in your relationships? Ask if it consistently tells the truth, even the hard truths; if it invites and inspires a rigorous and joyful obedience; if it strengthens hope in God and not in self.

Take Heart

The encouraging God, however, did not stay at arm's length. He was not content to send encouragement into the world through inspired messengers, but came to embody encouragement in flesh and blood. And so Jesus did.

Even on the eve of his betrayal, preparing to brave the mob, the cross, and the grave, Jesus stopped to encourage the fragile and fearful men following him. And how did he encourage them?

> Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:32–33)

He told them the truth: "I am about to die and leave you. And despite your good intentions now, you will each abandon me. And after I have gone, you will face even worse tribulation." His encouragement did not veil the shame of their betrayals or the harshness of what they would each suffer.

He also, however, told them the truth of all he would be for them through the darkness: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. . . . Take heart; I have overcome the world." In those fragile and fearful moments, he was not building up their self-confidence (quite the opposite). He was training them to endure by *hope in him*.

And in the face of a bleak outlook, promising to be with them wherever they went, he called them *to obey*. "Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (John 15:9–10). Because real encouragement fuels real obedience. And real obedience proves we live in the love of Christ.

We each need this kind of honest, hopeful, Godward encouragement, week in and week out, as we follow Jesus (Hebrews 3:13; 10:24–25). That means someone we know probably needs that kind of encouragement too, even today.