The Neglected Ministry of Specific Encouragement

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Few things are more powerful than a timely, specific word of encouragement. One word of encouragement can buoy mothers who feel unnoticed, pastors on the verge of burnout, friends struggling with depression, or singles feeling the weight of loneliness. Dane Ortlund once told this story:

A few weeks ago an older pastor said to me in passing, “You’re doing well.” It took him about five seconds to formulate the thought, say the words, and move on. Two weeks later—whether he’s right or not—I’m still drawing strength from it. The supernatural power of encouragement.

Most people have felt this. Not only is encouragement valuable (Prov. 25:11), it can actually be *healing*. Yet well-meaning attempts at encouragement can be ineffective, or even counterproductive. How can we ensure our encouragement is both effective and God-honoring? Consider three tips.

1. Be specific.

Perhaps the top reason many words of encouragement lack power is they aren’t specific enough. Consider the difference:

Generic: “Thanks for being a great friend.”

Specific: “Thanks for being an active listener. Yesterday when you let me share my struggles with you—and you stayed engaged and asked follow-up questions—that made me feel loved and valued.”

When you attach your encouragement to a specific action or habit of the individual—and to a specific way it makes *you feel*—it shows the person your encouragement is genuine. It also reassures her that her efforts are noticed (Matt. 6:4), and it reminds her that she has unique gifts and a meaningful purpose from God (Rom. 12:6).

The next time you encourage someone, ask yourself, *Was my encouragement specific? Or was it something that could be found on any motivational billboard?* As a general rule, the more *specific* a word of encouragement is, the more *powerful* it will be.

2. Follow your encouragement with a related question.

You've probably been in a situation when someone complimented you—and then abruptly stopped talking and stared at you, leaving you scrambling to think of an appropriate response. Perhaps you tried to break the tension by deflecting the compliment ("Aww, I'm not *that* good at singing") or by complimenting in response ("Well, you're a great singer, too"). In either case, the pressure to respond can often rob encouraging words of some of their power.

One of the best ways to avoid putting someone in this situation is to immediately follow up your words of encouragement with a question about how this person has come to excel in this area. For example, "You are great at asking questions. *How did you get so good at this?*"

Asking this follow-up question allows the other person to be encouraged, while also organically moving the conversation along (and bypassing that awkward staredown). This question also shows the other person that he has something valuable to offer—and it gives the encourager an opportunity to learn and grow.

3. Give credit to the Holy Spirit.

Herein lies the primary difference between worldly compliments and biblical encouragement. Worldly compliments exalt self; biblical encouragement exalts God. When someone receives biblical encouragement, she walks away praising and thanking *God*—not praising and inflating *self*.

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A great way to practice biblical encouragement is to follow your praise with "This is clear evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in you." (If the person is not a believer, you might say, "God has clearly given you gifts in this area.")

This gives the glory to God (James 1:17), it reminds the person that God is at work in his life (something many Christians have trouble recognizing in themselves), and it allows the person to receive the compliment with *gratitude* rather than with *pride*. Every opportunity to encourage someone is an opportunity to worship and enjoy God. Don't miss out on this.

To the Receiver

The best way to respond to a word of encouragement is with a simple and heartfelt "Thank you—that means a lot." It is not "humble" to deflect encouragement—in fact, deflecting encouragement actually belittles God's work in you, and it deprives the other person of the joy of building you up. Smile and say thank you. This will glorify God and create joy for both parties.

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You will almost certainly come across someone today who needs encouragement. Yes, today. Make the most of this opportunity by making your encouragement specific, asking how the person did it, and giving credit to the Holy Spirit. If you include these elements in your encouragement, you can be confident that your words are effective and that God is glorified.