An Eye for Grace: The Edifying Ministry of Encouragement

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FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2026 · SOVEREIGN GRACE PASTORS & LEADERS CONFERENCE 2026

> 1 Thess. 5:9–11 "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

A lesson from the Inklings

In Sovereign Grace Churches we have a rich heritage of pursuing encouragement. C. J. Mahaney has led the way, teaching us the importance of identifying evidences of grace, which means "actively looking for ways that God is at work in the lives of other people."[1]

Encouragement is one of our 7 Shaping Virtues.[2]

> Murray Harris "Encouragement is one of the most important ministries in the church of the New Testament."[3]
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> 1 Thess. 5:11 "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

- A commanded from the Lord
- The repeated "one another"
- "Just as you are doing"
- The significance of "Therefore"

Distinctly Christian encouragement is different than a mere compliment, because it aims at directing hearts to Christ and deepening confidence in him.

There is no one who is more skilled at encouraging the fainthearted than this glorious Savior.

> Isa. 42:3 "A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench."
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> Isa. 50:4 He possesses "the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary."

1 C. J. Mahaney, Humility: True Greatness (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2005), 98. Elsewhere he says, "We are all natural-born experts at critique. But I want to become an expert at discerning evidences of grace. If Paul can find grace in the Corinthian church, surely we can find grace in our churches. That's the transforming effect of a divine perspective. By seeing and celebrating grace, we not only emulate Paul's example; we emulate the example of God himself." C. J. Mahaney, Continue in What You Have Learned: Sermons from C. J. Mahaney that Shaped a Family of Churches (Sovereign Grace Churches, 2022), 22.

2 Sovereign Grace has identified seven Shaping Virtues as universal fruits of the gospel and qualities we desire to prioritize and pursue in our churches: humility, joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood, and godliness. These are commanded by God of all Christians and churches, and each is defined by Scripture not by culture or denominations. The list emphasizes relational virtues rather than mental and moral virtues, and is not intended to be exhaustive. These virtues are important because our churches are united not only by shared doctrine but also by a shared manner of life in Christ. See www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shaping-virtues.

3 This is quoted by Ray Ortlund in "The Surprising Ministry of Encouragement," December 8, 2020. https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-surprising-ministry-of-encouragement.

How can we grow in the grace of encouragement?

1. DISCOVER THE GOD OF ALL ENCOURAGEMENT

> Kevin DeYoung "Why do we imagine God to be so unmoved by our heart-felt attempts at obedience? He is, after all, our heavenly *Father*. What sort of father looks at his daughter's homemade birthday card and complains that the color scheme is all wrong? What kind of mother says to her son, after he gladly cleaned the garage but put the paint cans on the wrong shelf, 'This is worthless in my sight'? What sort of parent rolls his eyes when his child falls off the bike on the first try? There is no righteousness that makes us right with God except for the righteousness of Christ. But for those who have been made right with God by grace alone through faith alone and therefore have been adopted into God's family, many of our righteous deeds are not only *not* filthy in God's eyes, they are exceedingly sweet, precious, and pleasing to him."[4]

1 Corinthians 4:5 says that when the Lord returns, he will "bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God."[5]

> Zeph. 3:17 "He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."

Hebrews 11: the lives of Old Testament saints from the perspective of faith.

What can we learn from the high praise that God gives in Hebrews 11?

- It reveals the character of God. He sees the grace we often fail to see, and he overlooks the sin we often fixate upon.[6]
- It encourages us in the midst of our own weakness and sin.[7]

4 Kevin DeYoung, The Hole in our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 70.

5 "Commendation" in 1 Cor. 4:5 is epainos in the original. It's the word used for praise three times in Eph. 1—"to the praise of his glorious grace," verse 6, and "to the praise of glory," verses 12 and 14. John Piper is correct when he says, "[We tend to think] that it would be unfitting for God himself to commend his people, to praise his people . . . But that would be a profoundly unbiblical thing to say." John Piper, "Will God Really Praise Us?," www.desiringgod.org/interviews/will-god-really-praise-us.

6 J. C. Ryle writes, "You see no beauty in any action that you do. All seems imperfect, blemished, and defiled. You are often sick at heart of your own shortcomings. But now know, that Jesus can see some beauty in everything that you do from a conscientious desire to please him. His eye can discern excellence in the least thing which is a fruit of his own Spirit. He can pick out the grains of gold from amid the dross of your performances, and sift the wheat from amid the chaff in all your doings. Your endeavors to do good to others, however feeble, are written in his book of remembrance. He does not forget your work and labor or love, however little the world may regard it." J. C. Ryle, Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1979), 228. The puritan Christopher Love writes, "Weak Christians look more on their sins than on their graces; yet God looks on their graces and overlooks their sins and infirmities. . . . God reckons His people not by what is bad in them, but by what is good in them. . . . O it is good serving such a master, who is ready to reward the good we do, and is ready to forgive and pass by what is amiss. Therefore, you who have but little grace, yet remember that God will have His eye on that little grace." Christopher Love, sermon on 2 Timothy 2 (preached at St. Lawrence Jewry, London, April 20, 1651), quoted in Don Kistler, Why Read the Puritans Today? (Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999).

7 John Calvin writes, "There was none of them whose faith did not falter. . . . In every saint there is always to be found something reprehensible. Nevertheless although faith may be imperfect and incomplete it does not cease to be approved by God. There is no reason, therefore, why the fault from which we labor should break us or discourage us provided we go on by faith in the race of our calling." John Calvin, Hebrews and 1 and 2 Peter (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), 182.

- It informs the way we view and treat others.

  Thomas Brooks "It is sad to consider that saints should have many eyes to behold one another's infirmities, and not one eye to see each other's graces, that they should use spectacles to behold one another's weaknesses, rather than looking-glasses to behold one another's graces. . . . Tell me, saints, does not God look more upon his people's graces than upon their weaknesses? Surely he does. He looks more at David's and Asaph's uprightness than upon their infirmities, though they were great and many. He eyes more Job's patience than his passion. . . . Ah! saints, that you would make it the top of your glory in this, to be like your heavenly Father! By doing do, much sin would be prevented, the designs of wicked men frustrated, Satan outwitted, many wounds healed, many sad hearts cheered, and God more abundantly honored."[8]

2. FIGHT THE ENEMIES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

1) Spiritual pride

Phil. 2:3 "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."

Thomas Brooks "Humility will make a man excellent at covering others' infirmities, and at recording their gracious services, and at delighting in their graces; it makes a man rejoice in every light which outshines his own, and every wind which blows others good."[9]

Jonathan Edwards wrote *Thoughts on the Revival* (1742), both to defend The Great Awakening as a glorious work of God, and to express concern for the increased prevalence of "undiscerned spiritual pride," which he considered the greatest enemy of revival. "Alas, how much pride have the best of us in our hearts! . . . It is God's most stubborn enemy!"[10]

Jonathan Edwards "The spiritually proud person is apt to find fault with other saints, that they are low in grace; . . . and being quick to discern and take notice of their deficiencies. But the eminently humble Christian has so much to do at home, and sees so much evil in his own heart, and is so concerned about it, that he is not apt to be very busy with other hearts; he complains most of himself, and complains of his own coldness and lowness in grace. . . . Pure Christian humility disposes a person to take notice of every thing that is good in others, and to make the best of it, and to diminish their failings; but to have his eye chiefly on those things that are bad in himself, and to take much notice of everything that aggravates them. In a contrariety to this, it has been the manner in some places, or at least the manner of some persons, to speak of almost every thing that they see amiss in others."[11]

2) A lack of love

1 Pet. 3:8 "Have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind."

1 Cor. 13:4–7 "Love is patient and kind; . . . it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at

8 Thomas Brooks, Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices (Feather Trail Press, 2010), 147.

9 Brooks, Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices, 156.

10 Jonathan Edwards, Thoughts on the Revival, in The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 398–399.

11 Edwards, Thoughts on the Revival, 400.

wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

1 Pet. 4:8 "Love covers a multitude of sins."

Jeremiah Burroughs "If I must err, considering what our condition is here in this world, I will rather err by too much gentleness and mildness than by too much rigor and severity."[12]

3) Renegade discernment

4) Neglecting the ministry of showing up

Heb. 10:24–25 "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as it the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

Tony Payne "One of the most important acts of love and encouragement we can all engage in is the powerful encouragement of just being there—because every time I walk into church, I am wearing a metaphorical t-shirt that says 'God is important to me, and you are important to me' And on the back it says, 'And that's why I wouldn't dream of missing this.'"[13]

5) A parochial perspective

James Montgomery Boice "These were not his people. Antioch was not his home city. But God was working, and he was pleased. We need to learn from Barnabas in this respect—to be happy when God works somewhere else. All of us are happy (or at least most of the time are happy) when God works among us, blessing our denomination, church, people, or family. When he blesses somewhere else, well, we are not always so happy. We are restrained in our enthusiasm. Not only did Barnabas rejoice at what was going on, he also encouraged the believers."[14]

3. SEE AND CELEBRATE EVIDENCES OF GRACE

Acts 11:23–24 "When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."

David Peterson "His ability to discern the grace of God at work in others gave him a generous and encouraging spirit."[15]

True encouragement requires eyes that see grace in others, a heart that responds with gladness, and words that promote continued faithfulness.

12 Irenicum: Healing the Divisions Among God's People (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 381.

13 Tony Payne, How to Walk into Church (Matthias Media, 2015), 37.

14 James Montgomery Boice, Acts: An Expositional Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 200.

15 David G. Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 355.

1) Eyes that see grace in others

J. C. Ryle "There is no surer mark of backsliding and falling off in grace than an increased disposition to find fault, pick holes, and see weak points in others. . . . Let us be more quick to see grace, and more slow to see imperfections!"[16]

2) A heart that responds with gladness

3) Words that promote continued faithfulness

Prov. 12:25 "Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad."

Martyn Lloyd-Jones "I shall never cease to be grateful to Richard Sibbes who was balm to my soul at a period in my life when I was overworked and badly overtired, and therefore subject in an unusual manner to the onslaughts of the devil. In that state and condition what you need is some gentle, tender treatment for your soul. I found at that time that Richard Sibbes was an unfailing remedy. *The Bruised Reed* quietened, soothed, comforted, encouraged, and healed me."[17]

CONCLUSION: FATHER, FILL US WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT AND WITH FAITH!

16 J. C. Ryle, Holiness: It's Nature, Hindrance, Difficulties, and Roots (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1979), 87, 201.

17 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Preaching and Preachers (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 1972), 175.