

The Importance of Encouragement – How to be a Shepherd

Some years after Jesus appeared to Saul on the Damascus Road (Acts 9), Saul renamed Paul, traveled to Jerusalem, hoping to join the Apostles. But the disciples had reservations about meeting with Paul because he had a very recent history of severely persecuting followers of Christ when he was a Pharisee. Enter Barnabas. God sent Barnabas to Paul – his very name means “son of encouragement.”

With this encouragement at his side, Paul connected with the Apostles, received their blessing, and undertook a series of missionary journeys that would take the Gospel to the Gentile world. It is possible that many believers today can trace their spiritual roots to Paul’s missionary work. That work took place in conjunction with, not in opposition to, the Apostles in Jerusalem. All this happened in large part because of the strong encouragement of Barnabas.

We cannot overstate the importance of encouragement. Much of a shepherd’s ministry includes training, equipping, sending, and coordinating volunteer workers. In volunteer settings, encouragement and positive challenges from God’s word are the principal motivating forces that prompt productivity and spiritual maturity.

Encouragement is central to team-building and integral to fulfilling our calling to “*spur one another toward good works*” (Hebrews 10:24). Encouragement inspires individuals to give the best effort and persevere.

Satan despises encouragement. He sows discouragement, which can profoundly negatively impact our spiritual walk and service. More than 200 years ago, a Revolutionary War General made “discouraging the troops” a capital offense. More than 3400 years ago, 10 out of 12 spies returned from surveying the Promised Land and gave Moses a negative report. With strong words, they discouraged Moses and leaders from moving forward.

Numbers 14:1-5 notes that within one day, the embers of discouragement and doubt spread like wildfire within the camp. Soon “the entire assembly,” representing more than a million people, resisted God’s directive to move forward. Discouragement led to an entire generation of Hebrews forfeiting their chance to enter the Promised Land.

Satan is an expert at discouraging God’s people. His goal is to see believers slow down or abandon the important work the Lord calls us to accomplish. Encouragement from leaders in the faith is a powerful hedge against Satan’s attack. Follow these seven suggestions when you minister.

1. Recognize and affirm the positive

Note something positive about the simplest prayer, the most basic question, even an incorrect answer. Encourage participation. A leader’s comment as simple as “I really appreciate you sharing in the discussion today,” or “Thanks for reading Scripture today,” can motivate a timid individual to try again. It is not necessary to say, “Thank you for

reading for the class today, but you mispronounced four words.” Affirm the positive in public, and gently correct in private.

2. Remember and recognize special dates

Call and wish class members a happy birthday or anniversary. Congratulate individuals on the milestones they reach – 1 year sober, just finished reading the Bible through for the first time, been a Christian 6 months, etc. Walk with your people on their spiritual journey. Celebrate life with them.

3. Point out areas where you see spiritual growth

Weightlifters and dieters can easily make growth or progress by noting an increase or decrease in pounds or waist size. It’s not as clear in the spiritual realm. Sometimes newer believers have difficulty seeing progress and begin to slip toward discouragement. A good shepherd will help his people identify and celebrate growth areas. A good shepherd will encourage his people using letters, phone calls, and public and private comments. A good shepherd can let believers know they see the Spirit working in them in many different ways.

- Recognize a Spiritual Gift you see them developing
- Recognize they’re at ease praying or reading Scripture in public
- Recognize they have a growing concern for other believers
- Recognize they have a growing burden for the lost
- Recognize growth in what questions they ask, how they respond, and development in their personal study habits
- Recognize special service offered or a heart to encourage others

4. One-on-one time

Invite individuals to spend one-on-one time with you. Use these meetings to encourage, disciple, pray, share, and plan.

5. Sacrifice for your people

John 10 notes that a good shepherd *“lays his life down for his sheep.”* Serve and sacrifice, and you will inspire others *“to good works.”*

6. Lead by example

Do not expect those you lead to grow much beyond what people see in you. This includes your language, witness, service, giving, prayer life, and attention to the Word of God. Be transparent. Share your hurts, setbacks, and victories, and lead by example.

7. Be positive

There is a link between encouragement and optimism. Those who have little hope are not effective encouragers. Yes, the days are dark. Pray that God will touch your heart (Psalm 51) and mind (Romans 12:1-2), so that your life is an example of the joy and "*abundant life*" Jesus promised (John 10:10) despite the worst circumstances. People are encouraged toward spiritual maturity when they see in their leaders the qualities they admire and want in their own lives.

A shepherd's primary focus points are **1)** care for his people and **2)** move his people toward spiritual maturity. Knowing how to use the tool of encouragement promotes positive behavior in others and helps shepherds fulfill their calling.