

One Another, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 10: Encourage and Build Up One Another

1 Thessalonians 5:9–15

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson sits near the end of a letter written to comfort and steady a young, persecuted church, and that pastoral setting shapes everything. What is doctrinally at stake first is the ground Paul lays in verses 9 and 10: God has not appointed his people to wrath but to salvation through the Lord Jesus, who died for us so that we may live with him. Make sure your students see that the call to encourage and build up one another is not free-floating moralism. It rests on the finished work of Christ and the certain hope of the believer. People who are secure in Christ have courage to give away. This is the engine of the whole passage, and you should keep returning to it.

A second doctrinal point deserves clear handling. Verses 12 and 13 honor those “who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you.” This is a natural and important place to teach the God-given work of shepherds, the elders Christ appoints to oversee and care for a local congregation. Help students see that respecting and esteeming faithful leaders is not optional courtesy but a command, and that the work of encouragement runs both directions: members building up shepherds, shepherds laboring over members. Hold this together with verse 14, where love is shown to be discerning, treating the idle, the disheartened, and the weak each according to their real need.

But this passage was never meant only to be understood. It was written to form a community whose members daily put courage into one another and lay stone upon stone in each other's lives. So aim past information toward transformation. Your students do not merely need to define edification. They need to walk out of the room and actually strengthen a specific brother or sister, esteem a specific shepherd, refuse to repay a specific wrong with another. Keep the doctrine and the heart together: because we are secured by Christ and headed for life with him, we can pour ourselves out building up the body.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul grounds the whole exhortation in verses 9 and 10: “God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that ... we may live together with him.” How does being sure of our salvation in Christ become the very thing that frees us to spend ourselves encouraging others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin where Paul begins, with the gospel ground under the command. Before he ever says “encourage one another,” he reminds the Thessalonians that God has not destined them for wrath but for salvation through the Lord Jesus. Everything that follows grows out of that settled fact. Help students see that the order is not accidental. Assurance in Christ comes first, and the outpouring of encouragement flows from it.

Draw out the connection. A person who is anxious about their own standing, scrambling for their own security, tends to be turned inward and has little to give. But the believer who knows that Christ died for them, so that whether awake or asleep they will live together with him, has been set free from that gnawing self-concern. They can look outward. They have courage in hand, and courage is exactly what you give away when you encourage someone else.

Be careful to keep this consistent with the whole of New Testament teaching. The assurance Paul gives is not a guarantee of salvation regardless of how we live, the kind of false comfort that says “once saved, always saved.” This same letter calls them to live holy and blameless lives, and the writer of Hebrews warns this same kind of community not to fall away (Hebrews 3:12–14). The assurance is real, rooted in Christ’s death for us, and it is meant for those who continue faithfully in him. It is confidence in our Savior, not presumption about ourselves.

Bring it home practically. Encouragement is overflow. We can only put courage into others when we ourselves are standing on solid ground. So the most encouraging people in a congregation are usually those most deeply rooted in the certainty of the gospel. Press students to see that growing in assurance of their salvation in Christ is not selfish navel-gazing; it is the very thing that equips them to build others up.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation as God’s appointment of his people not to wrath but to life through the Lord Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:9; Romans 5:9)
- Christ’s substitutionary death as the ground of the believer’s hope: “he died for us” (1 Thessalonians 5:10; Romans 5:8)
- The believer’s certain hope of living together with Christ, whether awake or asleep, at his return (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18)
- Assurance in Christ as confidence in the Savior, held by those who remain faithful, not a presumption that ignores the call to continue (Hebrews 3:12–14; Colossians 1:22–23)
- Gospel security as the wellspring of an outward, self-giving life toward others

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul ground the command to encourage in the certainty of our salvation, rather than just commanding it on its own?
- How does a person’s anxiety about their own standing keep them from encouraging others?
- Where do you most need to grow in the settled assurance that frees you to pour into others?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul says, "Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." When was the last time you deliberately set out to build someone up in the faith? Be specific about who and how.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and the aim is honest specificity rather than guilt. Many of us think of ourselves as encouraging people in a general way, yet we would struggle to name the last time we deliberately set out to build a particular brother or sister up. Help students move from a vague self-image to an actual, recent, nameable instance.

Highlight Paul's words "just as in fact you are doing." He assumes encouragement is already happening among them, ordinary and steady, woven into daily life. This is not a special spiritual gift reserved for a few. It is the daily work of every member. Encourage students to see that they are called to this whether or not they feel naturally gifted at it.

Press toward concreteness. Building someone up might look like a text that reminds a struggling sister of a promise of God, a word of specific thanks to a brother whose service goes unnoticed, sitting with someone who is grieving, or telling a younger Christian what you see God doing in them. Vague good intentions build nothing. Help students name a real person and a real next step.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Edification as the ordinary, daily calling of every member, not a specialized role (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Romans 14:19)
- The church as a body built up as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:15–16)
- Words as instruments meant to build up according to others' needs (Ephesians 4:29)
- Self-examination as a healthy and normal part of the Christian walk (2 Corinthians 13:5)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between thinking of yourself as encouraging and actually encouraging a specific person?
- Why does Paul treat building one another up as ordinary daily work rather than a rare gift?
- Who is one person you could deliberately build up this week, and what exactly will you do?

Question 3

Student Question:

The verbs “encourage” and “build up” picture coming alongside the weak and laying stone upon stone. What do these images teach us about how God intends a congregation to be strengthened, and why does this differ from how the world thinks growth happens?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Slow down on the two images, because they are doing real theological work. “Encourage” pictures coming alongside someone to put strength into them, to lend your shoulder so they can keep walking. “Build up” is construction language, the patient laying of one stone upon another until a structure stands. Both are ordinary, unhurried, and physical. Neither is flashy. Help students feel the patience built into these words.

Contrast this with the world’s instinct about how things grow. The world tends to prize the dramatic, the large, the impressive, the quick. It measures strength by spectacle. But Paul says a congregation is strengthened the way a wall is built, by the steady laying of stones, and the way a weary traveler keeps going, by a friend’s arm under his. God’s design is cumulative and communal, not sudden and individual.

Connect this to the nature of the church itself. Scripture pictures the people of God as a building, a temple of living stones, with Christ as the cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4–5; Ephesians 2:19–22). A building does not rise by the cornerstone alone; every stone matters, and each is set in place by patient hands. This is why edification is mutual. We build up one another because God has designed the body to grow through the contribution of every member.

Apply it to congregational life. This means the most important work in a church is often the least visible: the steadying word, the patient presence, the encouragement no one sees. It also means no member is too small to matter, because every stone holds up the next. Help students value the slow, ordinary work and resist the temptation to think only the dramatic counts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church as a spiritual house of living stones built on Christ the cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4–5; Ephesians 2:19–22)
- Growth in the body as cumulative and mutual, each part doing its work (Ephesians 4:15–16)
- Encouragement as coming alongside the weak to strengthen them, not mere flattery
- God’s design for the church contrasted with the world’s preference for spectacle and speed
- The dignity and necessity of every member, however hidden their service

Discussion Prompts

- What do the images of laying stones and lending a shoulder teach us about the pace of real spiritual growth?
- Why does the world undervalue the kind of strengthening Paul describes?
- Where have you been tempted to think only the visible, dramatic work in the church really counts?

Question 4

Student Question:

Think about your words over this past week inside the church family. Did they mostly add courage and build people up, or did they more often chip away at others? Name one concrete moment of each.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns Paul's command into a mirror held up to our speech. Encouraging and building up are done largely with words, and so are their opposites. Help students examine not their intentions but the actual effect of their words over a specific, recent stretch of time. Real change starts with honest observation.

Draw on Ephesians 4:29, where Paul says no unwholesome talk should come out of our mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs. Notice the standard: words are meant to be construction materials, fitted to what the hearer actually needs. By that measure, much of our casual speech, our complaints, our subtle put-downs, our gossip, is not neutral; it is demolition rather than construction.

Keep the tone hopeful and formational. The goal is not to send students away ashamed of their tongues but to awaken a fresh desire to use their words as God intends. Encourage them to name one moment they built someone up and one moment they tore down, and to notice the difference in their own heart between the two. Honest awareness is the first stone in a new pattern.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Words as instruments either of building up or tearing down (Ephesians 4:29; Proverbs 18:21)
- The tongue as a revealer of the heart (James 3:9–12; Luke 6:45)
- The call to let our speech be gracious and fitted to the hearer's need (Colossians 4:6)
- Self-examination of our speech as part of growing in Christlikeness

Discussion Prompts

- By the standard of "building others up according to their needs," how would this past week's words measure up?
- What does our casual, careless speech reveal about what is really in our hearts?
- What is one habit of speech you sense the Lord inviting you to change?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verses 12 and 13 Paul tells them to respect and esteem those “who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you.” What does this teach us about how God shepherds his people and how we are to relate to the elders he sets over a congregation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a natural place to teach the God-given work of shepherds, so handle it clearly and warmly. Paul describes these leaders by what they do: they work hard among the people, they care for them in the Lord, and they admonish them. This threefold description matches the work the New Testament gives to elders, the men Christ appoints to oversee and shepherd a local congregation (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Titus 1:5–9). Help students see that God does not leave a congregation leaderless; he provides shepherds to care for the flock.

Notice the labor involved. The word for “work hard” speaks of toil to the point of weariness. Faithful shepherding is demanding, often hidden, and frequently thankless. It includes admonishing, the loving correction that a careless world resents but that genuine care requires. Paul knows this work is costly, which is exactly why he commands the members to respond rightly to it.

Draw out the command on the members’ side: “hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.” This is not a vague suggestion to be nice to the leadership. It is a command to esteem them highly, and the ground given is their work. We honor shepherds not because they are perfect or important by worldly standards, but because of the laboring, caring, admonishing work they do for our souls. Hebrews 13:17 adds that we are to submit to such leaders so their work may be a joy and not a burden.

Bring the doctrine to the heart. Encouragement, the theme of the whole passage, runs in both directions. Shepherds labor to build up the members; the members are to build up their shepherds by esteeming them, supporting them, and making their work a joy. A congregation where members quietly honor and pray for their elders, and elders sacrificially care for members, is a congregation being knit together as God designed. Press students to consider how they actually treat those who watch over their souls.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s provision of elders to shepherd and oversee the local congregation (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–4)
- The qualifications and appointment of elders in every congregation (Titus 1:5–9; 1 Timothy 3:1–7)
- The hard, caring, admonishing labor that genuine shepherding requires (1 Thessalonians 5:12)
- The command to esteem faithful leaders highly in love because of their work (1 Thessalonians 5:13; Hebrews 13:17)

- Encouragement flowing both ways, from shepherds to members and from members to shepherds

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change your view of your elders to picture the hidden, wearying labor their work involves?
- Why does Paul ground the honor we owe leaders in their work rather than in their personalities?
- What is one concrete way you could make the work of those who shepherd you a joy rather than a burden?

Question 6

Student Question:

Is there someone who labors over you in the Lord, an elder, a teacher, a faithful older Christian, whom you have taken for granted or quietly resented? What would it look like to esteem them highly in love this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses verse 13 into a particular relationship. It is easy to receive the labor of faithful leaders the way we receive electricity from a wall, noticing it only when it fails. Help students name a specific person who has labored over them spiritually and ask honestly how they have treated that person in their heart and their words.

Name the two common failures Paul's command addresses: taking leaders for granted, and quietly resenting them. The first forgets the cost of their labor; the second bristles at their admonishing. Both fall short of the command to esteem them highly in love. Be gentle here, because resentment toward leaders often grows out of real hurt, and students may need to process that honestly before the Lord.

Move toward concrete honor. Esteeming someone highly in love is not a feeling we summon but an action we take. It might mean a note of specific thanks, a word of encouragement to an elder who rarely hears one, prayer for a teacher by name, or simply receiving correction without defensiveness. Encourage students to name the person and name the act, and to do it this week before the impulse fades.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The command to esteem faithful leaders highly in love (1 Thessalonians 5:13)
- Submitting to and supporting those who keep watch over our souls (Hebrews 13:17)
- Honoring those who labor in the word and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17)
- Gratitude and respect toward spiritual leaders as concrete actions, not mere sentiment

Discussion Prompts

- Who has labored over your soul, and how have you actually treated them in your heart?
- What is the difference between taking a leader for granted and esteeming them highly in love?
- What is one concrete act of honor you will offer such a person this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Verse 14 gives different responses for different needs: “warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” What does this careful sorting teach us about real, discerning love within the body of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Slow down and notice how careful Paul is. He does not give one blanket instruction for everyone. He distinguishes the idle, the disheartened, and the weak, and prescribes a different response for each: warn, encourage, help. Then he wraps it all in patience toward everyone. Help students see that love is not one-size-fits-all. Real love pays attention to the actual condition of the person in front of us.

Walk through the categories. The idle and disruptive need to be warned, because the loving thing for someone wandering into laziness or disorder is honest correction, not comfort. The disheartened, those losing courage, need encouragement, the very thing the whole passage has been teaching. The weak need to be helped, supported, held up. To hand the idle person encouragement, or to scold the disheartened person, would be to misread the need and harm rather than help.

Draw out the discernment this requires. To love this way, we have to actually know people, to pay attention closely enough to tell the difference between the brother who is idle and the brother who is exhausted, between the sister who needs a gentle warning and the one who needs a gentle word. This is the opposite of detached, generic kindness. It is love that studies its object, the way a good physician studies a patient before prescribing.

Anchor it in the patience Paul adds. “Be patient with everyone.” Whatever the category, none of this can be done in a hurry or in irritation. People change slowly, and we will misjudge sometimes. Patience is the soil in which discerning love grows. Press students to consider whether their love for others is this attentive, or whether they tend to apply the same response to everyone regardless of need.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love as discerning, fitted to the real condition of each person (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

- The duty to lovingly admonish the idle and disorderly (2 Thessalonians 3:6–15)
- The duty to strengthen the disheartened and support the weak (Isaiah 35:3–4; Romans 15:1)
- Patience as the necessary climate for all care within the body (Colossians 3:12–13)
- The need to truly know one another in order to love one another well

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul prescribe different responses for the idle, the disheartened, and the weak?
- How might we harm someone by giving them comfort when they need a warning, or a warning when they need comfort?
- How well do you actually know the people you are called to love, and how could you know them better?

Question 8

Student Question:

Which of those four categories describes you most right now, the idle, the disheartened, the weak, or the one called to be patient with everyone? What does Paul's instruction press you to do about it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns verse 14 around so that students locate themselves in it rather than only diagnosing others. We are quick to sort our brothers and sisters into categories; it is harder to honestly ask which category fits us today. Help students see that the same loving care Paul prescribes is care they themselves may need to receive, or a posture they themselves are called to take.

Walk gently through the self-examination. Some students are spiritually idle, drifting, neglecting the work God has given them, and the loving thing is to receive the warning and stir themselves. Some are disheartened, courage running low under the weight of life, and they need to seek out and receive encouragement rather than suffer alone. Some are weak, in need of others to hold them up, and the humble step is to let themselves be helped.

Then there is the call to be patient with everyone, which lands on all of us. Encourage students who are tempted to impatience with slower or struggling members to hear this as their assignment. Whatever the category, Paul's instruction is not meant to leave us where we are. Help each student name their honest condition and the one step it presses on them, whether that is to repent of idleness, to seek encouragement, to receive help, or to grow in patience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer's call to honest self-assessment before God (2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 6:4)
- The humility to receive correction, encouragement, or help when we are the one in need

- Patience toward others as a fruit of the Spirit and a command on every member (Galatians 5:22; Colossians 3:12)
- The mutual nature of care, in which we both give and receive within the body

Discussion Prompts

- Which of Paul's four categories most honestly describes you right now, and why?
- Is it harder for you to give care to others or to humbly receive it when you are the one in need?
- What single step does your honest answer press you to take this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul commands, "Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else." Why does the refusal to repay evil for evil belong right here, alongside encouraging and building one another up, and how does it reflect the Lord Jesus himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, so give it room. At first the command not to repay wrong for wrong might seem like a separate topic, tacked on to the end. But Paul places it deliberately among the "one another" instructions, because nothing tears down a congregation faster than a cycle of retaliation, and nothing builds it up more than members who absorb wrongs rather than pass them on. Encouragement and the refusal to retaliate are two sides of the same building work.

Show students how counter-cultural and how Christlike this is. The world runs on payback; it is the most natural instinct we have. To be wronged and not return the wrong, but instead to seek the good of the one who hurt us, is humanly impossible apart from grace. Yet this is precisely what Jesus did. He was reviled and did not revile in return; when he suffered, he made no threats, but entrusted himself to the God who judges justly (1 Peter 2:21-23). At the cross he prayed for those who crucified him. The refusal to repay evil is the fragrance of Christ himself.

Connect this to the gospel ground of the whole passage. Remember verses 9 and 10: God did not appoint us to wrath, but Christ died for us while we were still his enemies. We who have received such undeserved good from God are now called to do good rather than evil to those around us, even those who wrong us. Romans 12:17-21 spells this out: do not repay evil for evil, leave room for God's justice, and overcome evil with good. We can let go of vengeance precisely because we trust the God who judges justly.

Notice too the breadth of the command: do good "for each other and for everyone else." The good Paul has in mind is not reserved for those who treat us well, and not even reserved for the

church. It reaches outside, to everyone. A congregation that absorbs wrongs and returns good becomes a visible display of the gospel to a watching, retaliating world. Press students to identify where a cycle of payback, in word or attitude, is quietly eating at a relationship, and what it would mean to break it with deliberate good.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The command never to repay evil for evil but to seek the good of all (1 Thessalonians 5:15; Romans 12:17)
- Christ as the supreme model, who did not revile in return but entrusted himself to God (1 Peter 2:21–23)
- Leaving vengeance to the God who judges justly, rather than taking it ourselves (Romans 12:19–21)
- The refusal to retaliate as essential to the building up, rather than tearing down, of the body
- Doing good even to those outside the church as a witness to the watching world (Galatians 6:10; Matthew 5:44–45)
- The gospel of undeserved grace as the ground for showing undeserved good to others

Discussion Prompts

- Why does a cycle of payback do more damage to a congregation than almost anything else?
- How does Jesus' refusal to revile in return, even at the cross, reshape the way you think about being wronged?
- Where is a quiet cycle of payback eating at one of your relationships, and how could you break it with deliberate good?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across 1 Thessalonians 5:9–15 as a whole: salvation secured in Christ, mutual encouragement, esteem for those who labor over us, discerning care for the struggling, and the refusal to repay evil. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage, and what you will do about it this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole lesson into one concrete commitment. Resist letting it stay general. “I want to be more encouraging” is a wish, not a step. Help students name a specific person, a specific arena, and a specific action drawn from what struck them most in the passage.

Encourage them to connect their answer to whatever pressed on their heart. For one student it may be the assurance of verses 9 and 10 and a call to rest in Christ so they can pour into others. For another it may be the call to esteem a shepherd they have taken for granted. For another it

may be the discerning love of verse 14, or the costly refusal to repay a wrong with another. Let the text itself drive the application, not a generic resolution to do better.

Close by lifting their eyes back to Christ. The aim of this study is not behavior modification but becoming like Jesus, who encourages the disheartened, esteems the weak, and absorbs wrongs rather than returning them. Remind students that the same Lord who calls them to build up the body supplies the courage and the love through his Spirit and his ongoing work in them. Send them out with one clear step and a confident hope that Christ is forming them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The goal of the Christian life as growing conformity to Christ (Romans 8:29)
- The Holy Spirit's work in producing the love and patience the passage requires (Galatians 5:22)
- Personal, specific obedience as the proper response to Christ's word (James 1:22)
- Christ as both the pattern and the power of the building-up life he calls us to

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this passage pressed on your heart most, and why?
- What is the one specific step you will take this week, and toward whom?
- How will you rely on Christ's Spirit, rather than your own willpower, as you take it?