

Encourage One Another

Part 4

1 Thessalonians 5:11

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“Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.” 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (KJV)

Building Community - Encourage One Another

People are less connected, less involved, less active in their communities today. People participate less in organizations and groups of every kind than they did a generation ago.

What we are seeing is that the "glue" which holds our society together, something academics call "social capital," has been getting weaker and weaker.

A book by **Robert Putnam**, a professor at Harvard, called "Bowling Alone," documents the decline in community life in American over the last four decades. The title of the book comes from a trivial but telling example: the percentage of adults who belong to a bowling league today is only about ¼ of what it was in the 1960's.

There are other examples:

The percentage of people who volunteer in a political campaign - stuffing envelopes, making phone calls, going door to door - is today about half what it was in the late 1960's.

Active membership in local clubs and organizations, like the PTA, has dropped by about half, percentage-wise, since the 1970's.

People are visiting one another less frequently, having friends over for dinner or getting together to play cards less often.

In short, every objective measure of participation in community and civic life is declining. And we are no exception to these pressures.

Since September 11 we have all seen fuel prices climbing dramatically - People are staying home and pulling in - It's called cocooning.

We are no exception at Living Word Christian Center. The same forces at work in our society are at work in our lives.

Two steps we must take.

We have to work intentionally at building and maintaining community within the church, or these same forces will separate us and isolate us from one another as well. We are rowing against the current of our culture; if we do nothing, we will get swept downstream. We have an opportunity!

Although the level of connectedness between people in our society has dropped, their need for connectedness has not. God made us social beings; people are still hungry for fellowship. And as they see our community, our love for one another, our care and concern and support for one another, they will want that for themselves. They will want to be a part of that. And we will have the opportunity to introduce them to Jesus Christ. **Because it is through our connection with Jesus Christ that we are connected to one another.** Our common union with Him produces our union with each other.

"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." -1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV) From this verse, we see that encouragement and building one another up is not something that just happens naturally. Paul had to instruct them to do it. And it's clear that encouragement is very important.

Why is encouragement important?

Encouragement is important because it helps us keep the faith. It helps us keep the faith; in the face of outside pressure... In case you hadn't noticed, this world is opposed to the gospel. We need encouragement to continue standing firm for Christ in the midst of a world that rejects Him; to keep believing in something that many people consider a myth.

This world regards Christians as fools, guiding our lives by a bunch of fairy tales, trying to keep an out-of-date moral code, believing things that the scientists, historians, and philosophers have told them can't possibly be true.

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him."
1 Corinthians 1:18, 2:14 (NIV)

How many of you like to be thought of as a fool? [I didn't say how many are fools]? Is that encouraging or discouraging?

Remember Kermit the frog's song "It's not easy being green" Well, sometimes it's not easy being me and perfect either. Just Kidding! But that's how a lot of "normal" people write us off. Pious, self-righteous and puffed up people who think we are perfect. God's gift to themselves.

In the face of internal struggle, following Jesus calls for personal sacrifice. Jesus said that **"His yoke is easy and His burden is light."**

But He also said that in order to follow Him, we have to deny ourselves and take up our cross every day. In other words, we have to be willing to give up everything, including if necessary our own lives, in order to follow Christ. We have to be willing to suffer and sacrifice. That's not easy. And then there is the personal struggle we all have against sin in our own hearts.

Yes we have been freed from the eternal consequences of sin but we still deal with the

effects of sin and its drag on our lives. It's kind of like driving a speed boat through a bed of weeds and getting the propeller clogged with vegetation. It slows you down and destroys your effectiveness. God's power is sufficient, but it's still a struggle. We need renewed strength every day, to follow Christ and not yield to temptation.

We need encouragement from one another to keep running, to finish the race and not give up.

Encouragement is important because it is so powerful. **Mark Twain** said, "**I can live for two months on a good compliment.**" He was right - so can I.

I had a lady walk out of church once and say, "I know you don't like to hear what a good preacher you are..." I have no idea where she got that idea. I certainly did not promote it. In fact you are all free to tell me that I'm a good speaker any time you'd like!

Think about it for a minute: How do we respond when we receive a compliment? We savor it, we turn it over and over in our minds, we repeat it to our spouse. "My boss said I did a good job this morning." We play it over and over again in our minds, until it's burned into our long-term memory. In short, we treat compliments like a starving man treats a good steak on an empty stomach.

Why is that? Because encouragement has such power.

Of course negative comments are very powerful too! The story of bad treatment at a store or vender gets repeated to 11 people. The story of good treatment at the same place gets repeated to 3 people. I've also heard (and experienced the reality) that it takes 5 compliments to overcome one negative statement.

"Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."
Proverbs 12:18 (NIV)

You have this power! If you have a tongue, you hold the power of spiritual life and health. Your speech has the power to revive us, your brothers and sisters in Christ: to renew our strength, to refresh our spirit, to lift us out of depression. That's what encouragement can do. Wouldn't it be a shame to have such awesome power and not use it? Especially when it benefits you too! **"A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."** **Proverbs 11:25 (NIV)**

How can we encourage one another?

There are three important factors to remember:

First, realize that encouragement can come in many forms. Encouraging words, or maybe just an understanding ear and a willingness to just listen. An arm around the shoulder. A gift. A note. An act of service. A word of appreciation.

Second, be with them. The number of ways in which we can encourage one another

are as many and varied as we are as individuals. The main thing is to communicate that you love them and care about them. Especially in times of grief. You don't have to have answers. In fact, platitudes and simple words like "Give it some time, the pain will go away" can be especially heartless. Just being there and hurting with someone makes the difference. Pastor Aiken said, "When my mother died in an auto accident the funeral service was especially healing for me. Not the words - the people that were there. I remember none of the words."

And Third, remind them of the truth. Don't pretend that their circumstances are any different or better than they really are [No empty platitudes]. But remind them of the truth about God, and the truth about themselves. Psalms and Proverbs are filled with encouragement. If you don't really understand where someone is struggling - David does. Or Solomon does!

Read the Psalms - it's like putting lotion on dry dead skin. It gives such relief to the dead, dry, withered, and burdened hearts. The work of encouragement means helping others to gain an eternal perspective on their troubles.

Point them to Christ. Remind them that God loves them, that He's in control, and that He hasn't abandoned them. Psalms 37 helped me personally when the towers of my life fell and it helps me still when I struggle with evil.

God never fails. He's always faithful. He's always good, even when it seems otherwise. While you're encouraging others of all that, you'll find that you're encouraged too.

Encourage One Another.

That's what we are to one another. We need one another to stand and cheer for us when our legs feel like rubber and our chest is on fire. When we would give almost anything just to be able to stop and quit, we need encouragers.

"Therefore . . . let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross. . . . Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." - Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIV)