

“Encourage One Another”
Sermon Series on
Becoming the Church that Jesus Longs For #5
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(1 Thess. 5:5-11)

Introduction.

I don't know how many of you have been following the NFL playoffs this year, but there was one particularly moving story that came out of a game that was played a couple of weeks ago. The Minnesota Vikings were playing the Seattle Seahawks in sub-freezing temperatures. They called it the Freezer Bowl! It was 13 degrees below zero!

With 20 seconds to go in the game, Blair Walsh lined up to kick a game-winning chip-shot 27-yard field goal. However, even though he's been one of the best kickers in the NFL, Blair shanked the kick and missed the crucial game-winner. Seattle ended up winning the game 10-9 largely because of Walsh's miss. It's got to be the worst feeling in sports – to miss the game-winning shot.

To his credit Blair handled the press conference with incredible class and dignity, and he took responsibility for the loss. At one point he was close to tears trying to express just how badly he felt about it all. Walsh is a stand-up guy, and I really admired how he handled it all. But it must have been devastating to feel the burden of missing a kick that could have won the game.

But here's where the story takes a remarkable turn. Students in the first grade of Northpoint Elementary School in Blaine, Minnesota, were studying a lesson on empathy in their class. After Walsh missed the kick, their teacher Judie Offerdahl thought it would be a great life lesson to have the students write letters of encouragement to the kicker to cheer him up. She instructed them to think about a time in their life when they had made a mistake and to try to lift Blair's spirits with words of encouragement.

One student wrote, “Dear Blair Walsh, You're the best player in the universe. Everyone makes mistakes. Your team still appreciates you. I know you'll help the Vikings win next time. Your friend, Luca Sciara.” Isn't that wonderful?

When have you experienced encouragement in your life from another person? How did it make you feel? In what ways did it help lift your spirits and change how you felt? As we strive to become the church that Jesus longs for, let's see what we can learn about the ministry of encouragement in the body of Christ from the Bible today.

I. The Gift of Encouragement.

Life can be discouraging, can't it? When you're struggling with a problem, when family members don't know the Lord, when you can't pay your bills, when school is difficult, when work is exhausting, when your health is failing, when the future is uncertain, or when a good friend leaves it's easy to be discouraged, isn't it?

Discouragement is a thief. It steals your vitality, your zeal, your joy, your peace, and your contentment. And if discouragement lives in your house for very long, its friends will soon move in and take up residence too. Their names are fatigue, hopelessness, despair, self-pity, depression, and doubt. Sometimes, discouragement can be so strong that you even don't want to go on living.

The best antidote to discouragement is its opposite – encouragement. The Greek word used in this passage in 1 Thessalonians 5 is the verb *parakaleo*. It means “to encourage.” But the word can also be translated “to come alongside, to help, to comfort, to exhort, or to strengthen,” and *parakaleo* applies to a wide range of actions. If believers start to lose their zeal for Christ, we encourage them by exhortation. If they struggle with a problem and stumble in their walk, we try to build them up. And in times of loss and disappointment, we encourage people by providing comfort. There are many ways to apply this command to encourage.

The root of the word *parakaleo* is also used to describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit. You will recall that Jesus told his disciples that He would send a “Helper” to them after the Lord ascended to the Father following His resurrection. The Holy Spirit is actually called the *Paracletetos* in John 14 and 15. The Holy Spirit is the One who Jesus sent to help and encourage the followers of Christ, and when we encourage another person, we follow the example of the Holy Spirit Himself. We participate in His spiritual ministry.

In his book *Love One Another*, author and professor Jerry Sittser writes that encouragement is to people what maintenance is to trucks and washing machines. Toyota trucks may drive for 300,000 miles, but only if we change the oil every 3,000 miles. Maytag washers may run well for years and years, but only if we take care of them properly. Encouragement is the maintenance ministry of the church of Jesus Christ.¹

II. Examples of Encouragement.

A number of years ago, a woman named Joyce Landorf wrote a book entitled *Balcony People*, and in that book she said that there are some people in the world who by their words and their actions bring you up and lift your spirits. They're what she called *balcony people*. Then she said there are other people in this world who through what they say and how they treat you bring you down and lay you

low. She called them *basement people*. Then she asked the question, “What kind of person are you?”

One of the best examples of a “balcony person” in all of Scripture is a man we read about in the book of Acts. His parents gave him the name Joseph, but the leaders of the early church called him Barnabas. They gave him the nickname Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement,” because of all the ways he encouraged everyone. You could say that Barnabas is the patron saint of encouragement!

When Barnabas learned that people in the early church were suffering financially, he sold a piece of property that he owned and gave the proceeds to help provide for the poor. Then when a number of Gentiles in the city of Antioch became followers of Christ, Barnabas was sent by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to check things out and to encourage them in their newfound faith. He saw a need for teaching these new believers, so he sought out Paul and persuaded the young apostle to come help teach the people in Antioch about the way of Christ. He affirmed Paul’s gift of teaching, and he encouraged the apostle to use this gift to build up the early church.

Later when he and Paul were travelling around the Mediterranean Sea as the first missionaries ever, it became clear that Paul had greater gifts for preaching and organization than Barnabas did. But Barnabas wasn’t threatened by that. And when a shift took place and Paul began to take more of the lead, he didn’t complain at all. He was willing to take a back seat and give top billing to someone else. He let other people shine, and he didn’t have to sit in the first chair.

Then when his nephew John Mark abandoned them on their first missionary journey, it was Barnabas who was willing to give the young man a second chance. And he encouraged John Mark to try again. Whether it was with his finances, or his ability to recruit people, or his willingness to take a back seat, or dealing with a person’s failure, Barnabas’ whole life was a ministry of encouragement.

However, you don’t just find examples of encouragement in the Bible. There are people all around us right here in our church who model encouragement. For example, Jennifer Richwine of our congregation has written thousands of thank you notes in her lifetime. Her reputation for writing memorable and timely notes of encouragement over the years led her to develop a talk which she later tuned into a book that was published in 2014. It’s entitled *With Gratitude: The Power of a Thank You Note*.

In her book Jennifer writes, “Over the years I’ve found that often I am the happiest and feel the most gratitude when I’m writing thank you notes. The very act of writing a note invests me with a renewed sense that I have a pretty good life and many reasons (and people) for which to be grateful. And once I figured this out, I wanted others to benefit from it as well.” So she wrote the book.

My wife Lorie has received over 400 cards and letters from people since she was diagnosed with cancer a year ago. And that doesn't count all the emails, phone calls, and meals people have sent our way. It has been an overwhelming flood of encouragement, and I'm confident that one of the reasons Lorie is doing so well today is because of the all the encouragement she has received from all of you and so many others from around the country and the world. You have been such an encouragement to us, and we're so grateful.

III. The Difference Encouragement Makes.

The gift of encouragement can make all the difference in a person's life. Author and pastor John Claypool tells of the time when he was a freshman at Mars Hill College here in North Carolina. He didn't know anyone, and he was a bit frightened as he began school.

The first Sunday on campus he got up and went to church by himself. He looked around in the sanctuary, and he didn't recognize anyone. When the service was over, he went to the college dining hall, got his tray and looked around for a familiar face. But he didn't see one, so he sat at a table by himself. His roommate was from Richmond, Virginia, and had lots of friends, and he was off with them. As John ate his meal alone in silence, he grew sadder and sadder.

When John went back to his dorm room, the whole weight of his loneliness began to settle on him. He said, "I remember in that time I did a very unmanly thing; I put my head on the desk, and I began to cry. Tears of fear, tears of homesickness, tears of loneliness."

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Quickly he cleaned himself up, because he didn't want to be found crying. He went to the door, and opened it. There at the door was an upperclassman, a sophomore who introduced himself and said, "I happened to see you sitting by yourself eating lunch, and I remembered what it was like last year when I started here as a stranger. I would simply like to offer you the gift of my friendship."

John invited the student in, and they talked about a variety of subjects. He gave John some tips about professors and things to do around town. Then the young man stood up and said, "Listen John, I really and truly would like to offer my friendship to you in these beginning days. What happens to you makes a difference to me." And with that he turned and left the room.

Looking back on that experience, John Claypool reflects, "I must say to you that the atmosphere inside of me was radically altered because of one human being [that day]."² That's the power of encouragement.

When Lorie and I lived in Dallas many years ago, I worked with college students at Southern Methodist University. And I'll never forget the day I read an editorial in the school newspaper one afternoon. Giles, who was the student editor

of the newspaper, wrote a column about how over a period of months he had grown very despondent. It seemed that the world was crashing in all around him, and he spiraled down into a state of despair and depression, so much so that decided he wanted to take his own life. He made a plan and prepared to carry it out.

But before Giles did, he walked across the campus to the office of the school newspaper to tie up some loose ends, as sometimes people do before they end their lives. Walking back across the campus to his apartment where he was planning to end it all, a friend stopped him and congratulated him on a recent national award he had received for work he did on the paper. Then the friend said, "You know, Giles, I just want you to know you really make a difference around here. I'm so glad you're my friend."

Giles continued in the column and wrote, "Because of that one word of encouragement from my friend, I decided not to end my life and that it was, in fact, worth living." Today, Giles is a pastor in the Methodist Church.

Conclusion

Who do you need to encourage this week? Who is there in your life at school, or work, or in your neighborhood, or even half-way around the world God wants you to encourage? Take time this week to encourage them. It may be just what they need.

I began my sermon talking about Minnesota Vikings kicker Blair Walsh, and how the kids in the first grade at Northpoint Elementary School in Blaine, Minnesota, wrote letters of encouragement. There is more to the story. The week after the kids sent their letters to Blair, the kicker made a surprise visit to the school to thank all the children. And he told them how much he appreciated all their support in a time when we was pretty sad because of the missed field goal. He also signed autographs, and he had his picture taken with the kids. It was a very special moment the children will never forget, and everyone learned a lot that day about encouragement in times of sadness and loss.

But there's even more. This past Sunday, New England Patriots kicker Stephen Gostkowski missed an extra point which proved to be decisive in the Patriots' loss to the Denver Broncos in the AFC Championship game. The Broncos won 20-18, and the missed extra point earlier in the game forced New England to attempt a 2-point conversion after they scored a touchdown at the end. The attempt failed, and the Broncos won the game. Guess who tweeted a message of empathy and encouragement to Gostkowski after the game? Blair Walsh. The gift of encouragement has a powerful rippling effect.

Jennifer Richwine concludes her book by saying, "I decided a long time ago that my contribution to the world was likely never going to be though grand or

monumental deeds and accomplishments. But like most people, I want my life to make a difference. I want to know that I've left the world a little better than I found it. And writing notes of gratitude [and encouragement], I believe, is one very special way to make a difference. It has the power to change moods, attitudes, relationships, and LIVES. Thank you notes are powerful in ways we can never fully understand or imagine. And they cost us almost nothing.”

Encourage someone today. It may surprise you to see what God does with your gift of encouragement. Amen.

¹ Gerald Sittser, *Love One Another*, p. 106.

² Taken from a message given at FPC Atlanta, GA, on August 27, 1994.