

Whenever I think of encouragement, I think of my good friend, Martin. Martin was English, and he was part of our church community in France. We worked on building sets for our annual summer children's camp in France. As I led the various project teams for our camp construction, one of my intentional practices was to encourage the teams as we worked through long, hot days to accomplish an extensive amount of work in a short period of time. Martin would often hear me offer encouragement, and say with his Manchester accent and trademark sarcasm, "Oh, you Americans and your encouragement! 'Good job!'" Encouragement to him seemed flat, superficial, cheesy, and of course, American (which, when living in a culture other than America, carries unique implications.) His comments led me to do two things: first, I made sure to tell him, "good job" as much as possible (to his annoyance and laughter), and, second, it made me think more deeply about encouragement. Is it superficial? Does encouragement have any value?

Oxford dictionary defines encouragement as, "the [act] of giving someone support, confidence, or hope." In other words, encouragement is something you do for the good of someone else. It is a gift you give, which can empower another person. I didn't think encouragement was important until I experienced it on the side of a mountain in Africa. Years ago, I took a team from our church to Uganda to work in a remote village building an education center. For two weeks we lived and worked on the side of a mountain on the border of Uganda and Rwanda. Each morning, we made the steep climb up the mountain to the worksite. One morning, our climb was more difficult than usual. It rained the night before, and the dirt path through the trees was now slippery mud. To complicate matters, we were carrying long boards and materials to the site. As we tried and failed to climb the mud-died mountain, the team started to bicker, taking out our weariness and frustration on each other. There wasn't much I could do from a physical resource to change the situation, so I tried to get us to see the situation from a new perspective. Through encouragement, we stopped and figured out a new way up the mountain. It seemed like a small thing, but the fascinating impact was that encouraging one another—rather than fighting against each other—helped us work more effectively and changed the team dynamic. I saw the power of encouragement.

However, there is a strange reality of encouragement. Though we have this gift to give to another person to help them, we rarely practice encouragement. Think about the last time someone

encouraged you. Was it a week ago? A month ago? Can you remember? I've worked both in corporate and ministry contexts, and encouragement is more rare than common. My experience, particularly in the corporate environment, is if you encourage people, you are observed as different than the norm. I can recall people describing me as "nice" or "pleasant" to be around—in contrast to the normative behavior. Encouragement is a gift each of us can give to one another to make each other better, yet we rarely give that gift.

We all need encouragement. We live in a world, which doesn't work as it should. Life is more complicated than catchy clichés can solve. We need someone outside of us to spur us on, to speak the truth, to call us forward into new realities.

The Apostle Paul wrote a benediction of encouragement to the community of Jesus followers in Thessalonica. In his benediction, he wrote that encouragement is a gift from a generous God for our good. And, as we practice encouragement, we join God in bringing His good into the world.

**May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17)**

When Paul arrived in Thessalonica in the AD 50s, the city had been a thriving Roman community for almost 200 years while maintaining its ancient Greek influence. With a population of 40,000, this capital city of Macedonia was situated on a strategic harbor and trade route.

This community of Jesus followers stood in the crossroads of Greek culture and Roman imperial theology. Their belief system and way of living resulted in hardship. *"For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews..."* (1 Thessalonians 2:14)

Paul was not exempt from the persecution; he was driven from the city and hindered from returning. He wrote, *"But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way."* (1 Thessalonians 2:17–18)

Through the anxiety of hardship, the community of Jesus followers were learning to make sense of the present, and wondering if the future would be any better. Paul's response through benediction began this way...

**So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. (verse 15)**

Paul drew their attention back to what God had done for them through Jesus. God loved them. God acted in grace—freely, moving toward people. And in love, through grace, here's what God did: God gave. Paul reminds them of the generosity of God.

For many people, "generous" is not associated with God. For many people, God withholds good, or, is at best, ambivalent. But the Biblical story describes God differently. At the beginning of creation, God gave everything to the first human beings to enjoy (Genesis 1:29; 2:9; 2:16). When the enemy entered the story to destroy the relationship between people and God, the enemy's tactic were to cause people to question God's generosity and His integrity. The story hinged on the unspoken question, "Would people trust that God is generous and believe that He has good for them?"

The generosity of God is seen even more clearly in the person of Jesus. Human beings rejected God's generous character at the beginning of creation, yet God gave again. Jesus articulates our heavenly Father giving Jesus the Son as a means of reconciling people to God. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16).

In reading Jesus' words, we face a new (and old) question: What if God is more generous than we ever imagined?

### **What God has Done for Them**

Paul leveraged God's generosity to highlight two things God gave to them because they followed Jesus. First, God gave them eternal encouragement. In other words, unending comfort or consolation. The biblical writers saw Jesus' reconciliation of people to God as comfort for a previously hopeless situation.

Second, God gave good hope. Hope is about what happens next. To hope, Calvin wrote, is to, "confidently expect a never-failing continuance of gifts." Leon Morris, a Bible commentator, wrote, "hope...is grounded in the divine nature and rests on the divine promises." Hope rests on the generosity of God. To hope is to believe God will never cease to be good and give good. That is why it is "good" hope—the hope, which is beneficial to people and central to what it means to be alive. It is hope, which is for them.

Paul's benediction declares God loved them, and in grace, gave to them. God gave unending comfort and hope, which was He would never cease to be good to them. Paul's benediction then takes the good God did for them and called them to act in ways, which create good for their world.

### **What They Can Do in the World**

**encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (verse 17)**

To encourage, in this context, could mean "to urge" or "to call out." Paul declares God would call out and solidify good works and words. "Deed and word" is a phrase, which covers the entirety of life, but the biblical writers had an interesting perspective on both.

The biblical writers perceived both our actions and our words had the potential to create good in the world or destroy good. What we do and what we say impacts the people and environments in which we live.

#### **Good Works**

Our works (actions) have the potential to create good. For example, in Galatians 6:9, Paul imagined good actions were like planting a seed that would produce something of value in the future. What we do now has the power to bring something better in the future.

But we can also act in ways to destroy good. In Paul's letter to Rome, he spent a lengthy chapter negotiating a disagreement regarding eating meat sacrificed to idols. It sounds strange to us today, but in Paul's day, there was a debate over whether a follower of Jesus were allowed to eat the meat, which was used in the sacrifice to a god of the era. For some, they thought a Jesus follower shouldn't contaminate themselves by associating with other gods. For others, they thought it was no problem to eat the meal because there were no other gods but Jesus.

In response, Paul makes a fascinating statement in Romans 14:15, *"If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died."* In other words, your actions could cause harm to a person for whom Christ died.

#### **Good Words**

Not only can our works be good (or not), but our words (or speech) also have the power to either create or destroy good in the world. Genesis 1 tells the story of God creating the world. With each action is this phrase, *"And God said..."* God spoke creation into being (Psalm 33:6, 2 Peter 3:5), and our words continue to have the potential to create good in the world. Think of the last person to share the news of a birth or wedding to you. You smiled, celebrated, and you felt the good that happened when those words were spoken to you.

But just as our words can create good, our words can also destroy good. James was one of the central leaders of the early church in Jerusalem. He lived in a culture of religious, political, and national upheaval. Using the jarring image of fire, James taught how speech could be harmful: *"It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell...With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it*

*we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be"* (James 3:6;9–10). If you have ever said something that hurt a person you love or spoke a word that divided a relationship, you understand the weight of James' teaching.

Paul's benediction for the Thessalonians is they would be reminded of the encouragement from their generous God. And God would call out of them works and words, which create good in their world.

Jesus both spoke and acted in ways that brought God's good into His world. He taught people about a new way they could relate to their heavenly Father. And He acted in ways to remove barriers between people and God.

What if encouragement is a way for you to do the same? How can we practice encouragement? Paul's benediction gives us two arenas to practice encouragement and bring the good God has for the world: our works and our words.

Two questions for you. First, what can you do this week to create good for another person? God has given something to you, which can benefit someone whom God has placed near you. Second, what

can you say this week to create good for another person? There is someone in your family, office, or your neighborhood, who could benefit from a good word from you. Maybe you need to stop listening to me and pull out your phone to send a text or email to this person right now. Make it specific and make it for them.

The Message version of the Bible paraphrases Paul's benediction in beautiful language.

**So, friends, take a firm stand, feet on the ground and head high. Keep a tight grip on what you were taught, whether in personal conversation or by our letter. May Jesus himself and God our Father, who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts of unending help and confidence, put a fresh heart in you, invigorate your work, enliven your speech. (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17)**

What if God is more generous than you ever imagined? And what if encouragement—your good works and good words—are how you do the same as God? Encouragement could take on an entirely new meaning.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1438-3S

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This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, June 17, 2018 at Central Peninsula Church South.

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