

How Encouragement Works (part 1)

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[0:00] This is our fourth lesson in our series on encouragement.! What else can we say?

From Ephesians chapter 4. Does anyone remember? Speaking the truth in love. That's the major part of encouragement. When we encourage, we are speaking the truth in love. And the truth, specifically in that passage, is the gospel.

And so we're speaking the truth in love, both to believers and to unbelievers, for Christlikeness, in order to build them up in the image of Jesus Christ.

And it's as we see the day approaching. We gather that part of the definition from Hebrews 10.

There is a coming, a day of judgment, and that should spur us on to do encouragement.

Then we've seen the power of words. Words have power to build up, and words have power to tear down. And words reflect who we are.

[1:20] Words have this amazing ability to take what's inside of a man and bring it out so everyone can see. And so a fool's words pierce like a sword.

His heart is dangerous and reckless and painful when it's exposed. And so his words pierce like a sword. But the wise man is also known for his words. And so out of the overflow of his heart, there comes healing.

His words bring healing. And then last time we saw the greatest speaker. When words are spoken at the right time, the right way, by the right person, they have immense power for good or for evil.

And that's true on the human level. But it's especially true when we're talking about God. When God speaks, amazing, amazing things happen.

And so I know it's been two weeks now, but can you think of some of the things that happens?

What are some of those things that happen when God speaks? When he speaks, what happens?

[2:32] Creation. Creation. Genesis 1. God said and God said and God said. And the whole earth is created and filled with wonderful, amazing things.

What else happens? Miracles happen. What else happens? Miracles of the new birth. The new birth.

When God speaks into our hearts. It's like Ezekiel talks about. There's this valley of dry bones and the spirit comes upon a man.

And those bones come to life. So when God speaks into a person's heart, they are raised to new life. What else happens when God speaks? What did he do for Adam and Eve when he spoke to them for the first time?

He did a couple of things. Well, when God speaks, he commands. That's one thing. He commands. And those commands, those words, have an immense power to shape and to guide and to direct our lives.

[3:38] And so from the very beginning, we were never meant to live without God speaking into our lives. We were meant to have ears that are ready to hear God's commands.

And so those commands shape the way we are supposed to live. What else does God do when he speaks? He commands. He blesses. Remember, he blessed Adam and Eve.

And those words of blessing had an immense power to shape their entire lives. And so from the point that God blessed man and said, you have dominion over all the earth. Men have had dominion.

He promises. He promises. Just think about what God's promises have done.

When God promised to Noah that I will never flood the earth again with water. I'll never destroy this earth again with water. That promise has been upholding the world from that day to this.

[4:36] It's been preserving it from God's judgment until the end. God saves. And then finally, God reveals himself.

How does he reveal himself ultimately? In his son. In his son. In his son. In his son. And John calls his son the word. God speaks out the son into our world.

And through that revelation, we can come to have a relationship with God. Through Jesus Christ, the living word. And so we've been talking about those kinds of things for the last few weeks. We've been laying the foundation for how we do encouragement. And today, we want to look under the hood and ask the question, how does encouragement work?

Why does encouragement work? Why are words so powerful to build people up into Christlikeness? We know that God's words are powerful.

[5 : 39] We just talked about it. When God speaks, wonderful, amazing things happen. But how does that power translate into words that we speak to one another and so that we are built up?

Well, that's the question. How does encouragement work for good? Why is encouragement powerful? And I think we can first answer that question at the most basic level.

And that is that words are able to encourage people because, like God, we have the power of language. We're made in the image of God.

And God is the greatest speaker. He is a speaker. He uses words and language. And because we are made like him, we can use words that are powerful as well.

So have you ever thought, right from the very beginning, God made us to be speakers? We were never meant to be silent.

[6 : 38] We were never meant to not have words. So from the very beginning, God made male and female in his image. And so there's this duality.

There's this male and female. And humanity needs both in order to reflect God's glory. We were never meant to be alone. We were meant for relationships.

And words are the bonds of relationships. Relationships occur because of how we use our words. And so Adam knew how to speak from the very beginning because that was how he was made. He knew how to speak. And so he was talking right out of the gate. Remember, God gives Adam a task to name all the animals. And it's not just naming them.

It's relating to them and coming to understand them as he speaks to them. And so as they're brought forth, he uses his words to identify them, to recognize them, and then to determine his relationship with them.

[7 : 37] And so as he's speaking, he says, yes, that's a lion. And he realized that a lion doesn't correspond to him. A lion is a lion, but a lion wasn't made for relationship with him.

And so it went on and on and on until God made Eve out of the body of Adam. And as soon as Adam saw Eve, he spoke.

And those words identified and related Eve to him. He said, this one is for me. This one, this is one of me. He said, this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.

That's intimacy. And his words shape their relationship. And his words reflect their relationship. And so now he begins a relationship with Eve with those words.

And that's how God has meant us to be, to relate to one another. All our relationships are built on words. You can't know someone unless you speak to them.

[8 : 41] And you can't know another person. And they can't know you unless you speak to them. And so when we speak, our words have this huge impact to build relationships.

Now, but of all the words that we say and all the different ways that we relate to each other, what makes some of our words encouraging?

And what makes other of our words not encouraging? We use a lot of words. What makes encouraging words so special? Well, if you remember back from week one, you'll know some of the answers to that.

Because when Paul calls us to speak the truth in love, he's talking about the gospel.

And so you should be understanding now that what makes certain words encouraging and other words not encouraging is how full of the gospel are they?

[9 : 41] How full up with the gospel are they? How much are they resting on the gospel? And we're going to see this later, that it's not just explicit gospel words like Jesus saves, Jesus the Lord, Jesus rules for you.

Explicit gospel words that can be encouraging. But it's also words of wisdom. Even words of prayer. When they are resting on the gospel, when they are trusting and depending upon the gospel, when they're the soil, when the gospel is the soil that they're growing out of, those words can be

encouraging.

And so the answer is to the question of how does encouragement work? It's this, because the gospel is powerful. And when we encourage, we're using the gospel.

And the gospel itself is powerful. And so the gospel is the power for encouragement. I'd ask you to turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 1.

Romans chapter 1. And we're going to look at verses 16 and 17.

[10:58] Romans 1, verses 16 and 17. And this is Paul speaking. I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

First for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. A righteousness that is by faith from first to last.

Just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith. Now, Paul wasn't ashamed to speak the gospel. Why? What does it say?

It's not a hard question. Why is he not ashamed of the gospel? It's the power of God unto salvation. When Paul spoke the gospel, it was unleashing God's power for salvation.

And we are not ashamed of great show and acts of power. We're not ashamed. We don't try to hide amazing things. And Paul is saying the gospel is the revelation, is the explanation of God's power unto salvation.

[12:07] And not only that, but when the gospel comes, it works powerfully to save everyone who believes. So when Paul opened his mouth and told people of the coming judgment and told them about Jesus Christ and his lordship and his salvation, he participated in transferring people from darkness to light, from death to life.

And so the gospel is the power of God for salvation. And that means the gospel is God's ordained means for conversion, for converting people.

So it goes back to what we talked about in Ezekiel, about those dry bones. The gospel is the power, when God applies it by his spirit, to bring those dead bones to life, from transferring them from Satan's kingdom to the kingdom of his son.

The gospel delivers us from the condemnation of the law. Why? What does the gospel tell us about? And we saw it in Romans 1, 16 and 17.

For in the gospel, what is revealed? Something we desperately need. Righteousness. A righteousness not from ourselves, but from God.

[13:34] And it's from faith, for faith. And so the gospel is the message of Jesus' triumph over hell and sin and death and condemnation.

And when we believe, we are joined to Jesus Christ. We're joined in his life and his death. And so we die to sin.

And we live to God. We're born again. And so Paul could write to the church in Colossae and say, When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you will also appear with him in glory.

What is your life? Who is your life? Through the gospel, it's Jesus Christ himself. He is your life. And so the gospel brings us, by the power of the spirit, into this intimate union with Jesus Christ.

And it's so intimate that he is now our life. So we died with him and we live with him. And then we're going to be glorified with him on the last day.

[14:39] And so the gospel is God's power to completely revolutionize a person's life. To take us from being strangers to being the bride of Christ.

From totally changing our identity. And so the gospel is God's power in conversion. Now, I think we do need to recognize here that for our purposes, when we're talking about encouragement, we need to see that the gospel is God's power for salvation, not just for conversion, but also for our ongoing salvation, our ongoing experience of salvation from sin in our lives.

And from the power of Satan and the reign of sin in our lives. And so we don't just need the gospel for conversion. We need it for an ongoing rescue to keep us from falling back, so to speak, into the grips of the powers of this evil age.

And so we experience that salvation, first in conversion, and then we experience that salvation every day more and more as we're delivered from sin. As we're sanctified.

And we do that by hearing and believing the gospel again and again as we believe, and then we act out of that faith. For the just shall live by faith.

[16:06] So faith is the bread and butter of the Christian's life. Faith begins your life. And faith is the ongoing reality of the Christian life.

And so faith and repentance, those are the means of experiencing more and more Christ-likeness in our life. So as we believe more and more, we become more and more like Jesus.

As we behold him, we are changed. And as we believe, our faith now works through love. And we live a life of obedience out of faith.

Now, what does all that have to do with encouragement? It's just this. That when we speak the gospel to each other, we are helping each other into that Christ-likeness.

We are reminding each other of what Jesus has done. We're exposing one another to the gospel again and again in new and different ways. And so the gospel becomes the power of God for salvation in our everyday life.

[17:12] Now, I want to show you an example of this. Turn over to 1 Thessalonians. 1

Thessalonians. And we're going to see two parts to show you how the gospel works to make people Christ-like.

And the first part is 1 Thessalonians 1, verses 4 and 5. 1 Thessalonians 1, 4 and 5.

This is what it says. So that's how the gospel came to them.

With power, Holy Spirit, with deep conviction. So what happens to a person's life when that kind of power and the Holy Spirit works in the gospel?

Well, look down at the middle of verse 9. They tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath.

[18:35] So the gospel, by the power of the Spirit, turned the Thessalonians' lives completely around. They lived in a culture where idols were everywhere, where idols filled their lives.

Remember when Paul was walking through the city of Athens and he's just grieved by the number of idols. There was idols for everything. For eating.

For drinking. For sex. For commerce. For travel. For home life. For business. You name it. Every aspect of life was filled with idolatry.

And so with that in mind, think about how revolutionary the change was for the Thessalonians. They turned away from idolatry to serve the living God.

Imagine how many different ways that affected their life. Every part of their life was changed because they turned away from idols. And so it was a complete change.

[19:41] And what has the power to do that? Well, it's the Spirit-empowered gospel proclamation. Paul's words with the Spirit's power changed how they lived.

It changed how they were living. And it changed what they were living for. You notice that in verse 10. Now they're looking, not to this ordinary life, not to this world, not to anything here, but they're looking for the return of Jesus Christ.

Their life now has a totally different direction. The arrow is pointed in a different way. It's pointed towards Jesus Christ now. And so that's why Paul could say that the message rang out from you. Everyone heard and saw and experienced the power of the gospel because their lives were so changed. Now the question is, what is going to keep them?

What's going to keep them from falling back into idolatry? What's going to keep them out of the brothels and out of the temples and going back to their old life, their old way of doing business, their old way of living at home, their old way of traveling and staying at home?

[20:52] Well, it was going to be the gospel again, a reminder again and again of what the gospel said. It wasn't going to be something new or different. And so turn over to chapter 5. Chapter 5, 1 Thessalonians.

And look at verse 4.

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.

So then let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet. Then it goes on.

[21:53] Verse 11. Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. What's going to keep them from falling back into their old life of living in darkness?

Well, Paul reminds them of who they are in Jesus. They're not of the night anymore. They're not sons of darkness. They're the sons of the light.

And so he says, act like it. Stay awake. You're expecting Jesus to come. Well, keep expecting. Keep alert. Stay self-controlled. Don't live like the dark.

We belong to the day, so let's live like we belong to the day. Let's live self-controlled lives. And so what is Paul doing here? He's encouraging them. And he says, now you encourage one another. So he's speaking the truth in love. He's reminding them again of who they are and how to live out of who they are. And so the gospel is the power of God first for conversion and then for ongoing salvation from idols, from godless living, for going back and living a hopeless, dark, Christless life. [23:04] That's the way encouragement works. Encouraging words encourage us because they remind us of what we already have in Jesus, what he's promised for us, how we're supposed to live now out of what he's made us.

Because where the gospel is, the spirit is working. And God's work is at work. God's word is at work in us. God's power is at work in us, both to convert and to sanctify.

Now, that's what happened in Paul's life. That's what happened in the Thessalonians' lives. How can we know that when we speak to one another that the same kind of power is going to be seen and experienced?

It was true of Paul. How do we know it's going to be true of us as well? Because if it's just true of Paul, then really all that we've been saying is pointless. I mean, if encouragement worked like that for Paul, but it doesn't work like that for us, then really we've been talking in vain.

So how do we know that when we speak, when you speak, that the gospel is going to have that kind of power? Well, the answer is found in Ephesians 4. Will you please turn over to Ephesians 4? [24:29] We're going to read. We've already read this passage once in this series, and we're going to read it again. It's chapter 4, verse 7 through 13. And the question is, how do we know that when we speak the gospel to each other, that it's going to have power to change and to sanctify?

Well, let's read verse 7. But to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, when he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.

What does he ascended mean except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

We can know that God will honor his word when we speak it because Jesus has conquered. He has overcome everything and he's given gifts to men.

[25:58] And we're going to see that's not just a few men. It's everyone. Verse 7, to each one of us grace has been given as Christ has apportioned it.

Each one of us has been given a gift. And the most prominent of these gifts is the gift of gospel speech where we speak the gospel to each other.

And so the image here is a very familiar one. It was the image of a triumph. It's a glorious procession. So what would happen in the ancient world, I'm sure you've heard of this before, when a general conquered an enemy, when he killed, I think the minimum was 500 enemy, he received some sort of procession.

And the conquering general led his captives, the people that he had captured, in his train. And the conquering general, as he's riding in his chariot and his captives are walking behind him, he would give out gifts to the watching crowd.

And so, brothers and sisters, we are that watching crowd. We are seeing, we have seen, Jesus Christ come down, conquer, and then ascend once again.

[27:16] And once he ascended, he's now given gifts to men, to all these people who have watched and who have believed in him. Now, it's something interesting.

I was reading this week and I came across something that I found very striking. During these processions, the conquering hero would be in his chariot and the watching crowds are all around and everyone's yelling and cheering.

But next to the conquering hero in his chariot, if you were to look, you would see another man standing there. And I found this very peculiar. And that man's job was simple.

He would stand next to the conquering hero and say, you are a mortal man. You are a mortal man. You are a mortal man.

Again and again and again. And the reason was, yes, you're a conquering hero today, but you are going to face an enemy that you cannot conquer and death will take you.

[28 : 16] But this is where Jesus totally transforms the picture and changes it. And this is how we see how glorious Jesus Christ is. The enemy that Jesus conquered was death itself.

So there's no one saying in his ear, you are a mortal man. Because he's no longer a mortal man. He died and he rose again. And the crushed foe is death itself.

And so, now this glorious hero that is ascended so that he fills the whole universe, he's given gifts to men. And you notice what kind of gifts they are.

Apostles and prophets. Those are men who speak and write the scripture itself. Then there are evangelists. Those are people who are responsible to proclaim the gospel to the whole earth, to the ends of the earth.

And then there's pastors and teachers. Those are people that are responsible for preaching and teaching in the church and from house to house. And then Paul does something.

[29 : 20] He widens the scope. He's talked about these three groups. And then in verse 15, he includes everyone. He includes all people.

All of the church. And he says, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head. Now it's we. It's you.

It's me. It's everyone speaking the truth in love. And so that, where does the power to encourage come from? It doesn't come from me or from you sitting in your seat.

It comes from Jesus Christ. And this gift is given to all men. This gift of encouragement. And so it's not just trained men. It's not professional men. This is Jesus' gift to the entire church.

And so you, you, you are a gift of Jesus Christ to his church. You are. we need you to speak to us.

[30 : 27] We need you to speak to us. We don't need to hear just how your job is, what happened in the sports game, whatever.

We need you to speak the gospel to us. Speak the truth in love to us. We need you to share God's grace with us. And you can do this because you've been gifted in that way.

You can't, maybe you can't preach. Maybe you can't teach. But every person here can speak the truth in love to another person individually.

And we're promised that as we do, that word's going to be powerful to build us up, to encourage us. And it's powerful because Jesus has triumphed.

He has conquered death and sin and hell and everything and now he rules on high. He has triumphed. And it's his power. It's his grace. It's his spirit at work in every single one of us.

[31 : 30] Remember what Joel the prophet said? Peter quoted it on the day of Pentecost. And he said this, in the last days, that's these days, the days after the Messiah comes, the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my spirit in those days and they will prophesy.

Now, whatever that means, and I'm sure there's a lot of things it means and it doesn't mean, whatever it means, it is clear that if you are in Jesus Christ, you have received the Holy Spirit.

He's poured it out on you and now you have authority and power to speak the truth, to speak the gospel to one another in a way that does real good.

God. And so don't say, I'm no one or I don't have any gifts. Maybe you can't preach. Maybe you can't teach. But all of us can say something about Jesus to our brothers and sisters.

[32 : 41] You don't have to be eloquent to do that. You don't have to stand in the pulpit with authority and say things like, just speak Jesus to us. Tell us about Jesus, what he's done, what he's promised.

All of us can say something to encourage one another because the power doesn't come from us. The power comes from the throne and he has ascended over all.

And so, in a real, in a wonderful way, we can say that we are God's fellow workers. We can say that we are God's fellow workers.

believers. Remember, in 1 Corinthians, the people in Corinth were fighting about who they belonged to. You know, we belong to Paul, we belong to Cephas, we're of Apollos.

And Paul says, why are you fighting about that? Who are we? Who are we? Who am I? We're just God's fellow workers. Others. That was humility and that was also an amazing reality that we are, that Paul could say, I'm actually God's fellow worker.

[33:58] I'm working beside him. Now, that's true for all of us because we've all received the Spirit. We're sort of like children helping their mom bake cookies.

you know that if your children are helping you cook, it takes 10 times as long to do anything, doesn't it? It takes a lot of grace for mom to say, okay, you guys can come and help me because the children are enthusiastic, aren't they?

They're enthusiastic but they're not at all steady. You know, milk goes everywhere, the sugar gets dumped, they forget what they're doing, they've lost track of what the recipe is, they pour too much into different things, but mom's grace covers it all, doesn't it?

It's all, she works through it all and the good things that the children do are actually real good. The children actually do help and that's the way it is with us.

You know, we are going to mess up in this business of encouraging. We're not going to say the right things. We're going to say the wrong things. We're going to get distracted.

[35:18] We're going to forget what we're about. We're going to get frustrated with another person. We're going to sin. But God's grace covers it. Covers it.

And the things that we do are actually good. God actually uses them to bake the cookies, to build up the church. And so we actually take our place next to our Father and become His fellow workers. And it's done in such a way that we actually are used to sanctify people but we're left without any of the ability to boast because we know what we are. We know how we've messed up.

And so like Paul, we can take real joy and you can take real joy in knowing that I am God's fellow worker. He's brought me into the kitchen and he said, now help me do this.

And yeah, we're going to mess up but he's going to forgive us and he's going to give us his grace and he's going to help us and he's going to take our hand and he's going to steady us. It's an amazing grace that we can be called God's fellow workers but that's what we are.

[36:26] It's really amazing to me when every time someone says about a message or a lesson that I teach, well that really helped me. Thank you. That really encouraged me. That amazes me because I know who I am.

I am a big rotten sinner. And besides that, at best, I'm just a human. At best, I'm just a human and I can't reach into your heart.

I can't make you understand. I can't make you believe. But by God's grace, I am his fellow worker. And he studies my childish hands and so he takes all my spilt milk and all my dumped sugar and he uses it to build you up.

And so it's grace from first to last. And that's not just true of me. That's true of all of you. You've received God's spirit. You've been blessed with every spiritual gift that you need.

And so, you're God's people. You're God's fellow workers. He's promised you grace. Jesus won all those things with his victorious death and resurrection.

[37:31] And so now he rules on high to bless you. He rules on high right now so that when we go out from this Sunday school classroom, we can speak the gospel to one another and it will do real good.

So we need to say hallelujah, what a Savior, to take sinners like us and use us. Well, we are dismissed. .