

Encouraged or Discouraged?

Ephesians 3:14-21

Two Texas cowboys were riding the range one day when they came upon a herd of buffalo. They paused for a moment to take in the sight of these huge animals. Then one cowboy said to the other, "Have you ever seen an uglier varmint than that?" The other replied: "Naw, I haven't. Look at that big ugly head and that mangy hair." Then the two cowboys rode off. At that point one buffalo turned and said to another, "I think I just heard a discouraging word!"

There is a great need for encouragement in our lives. We live in times when there is just so much negative being forced into our thoughts every day. It can cause us to question ourselves, question our self-worth, search for meaning and purpose, compare ourselves to others. Why is it that we can have 100 people compliment us, but then one word of criticism, and that's what we dwell on? It can create discouragement and apathy in us.

Scattered through-out the NT are references to a variety of spiritual gifts that these folks needed until the NT was completed. We are told that when we obey the gospel we receive the Holy Spirit. When someone asks me what that is I tell them it's like God creates in each of us certain passions based on our ability. Maybe it's teaching, hospitality, giving, encouragement are just a few.

Your gift is God's ticket for you to be involved in his Kingdom work. One preacher I know calls these jobs within the church, "**inhouse jobs or outhouse jobs**". Some people are passionate about cleaning tables. I don't get that, but I admire them. I can do it, all of you will do it, but it may seem more like a chore. When you use your gift, that which you are passionate about, you have a front row seat to God's Kingdom work, like sitting in the best seat in the house in a theater with popcorn and thoroughly enjoying watching what God is doing through you.

A wonderful gift I want to emphasize today is encouragement. Like so many of the gifts, if encouraging others comes very naturally to you, God wants you to encourage the rest of us to be encouragers.

Encouragement is something all of us can do. Just his past week I did something around the house and Joyce told me I did a good job. That comes very naturally to her and I'm thankful for it for our kids' sake. I was always making sure things got done and I don't know that I was much of an encourager to our two older kids. I think I did better with the younger two. Thankfully, Joyce was there to encourage all of them.

Our text this morning is one of the great prayers of the Apostle Paul as an example of encouragement. Paul is an encourager. He's the author of a dozen NT letters, and if you look at the first 3 or 4 verses of almost every letter he wrote you'll be encouraged. He says, "I love you, I miss you, I want to be with you, I'm praying for God's grace/mercy for you.

A person with a gift of encouragement helps people have hope, the expectation and desire for things to get better, encouraging them to be thankful in all things for this is the will of God. Paul demonstrates in the difficulties, tribulations, trials and afflictions of life how you encourage people to be patient, to wait on the Lord and to persevere allowing God to work out His desire, design and direction in your life. Listen to Eph. 4:14-21 ***"¹⁴ that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵ but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. ¹⁷ This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, ¹⁸ having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; ¹⁹ who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. ²⁰ But you have not so learned Christ, ²¹ if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus:***

Tremendous Words of Encouragement.

When you are encouraged, you know that you are not alone. Paul notices the people. He lets them know - **I know your needs**. This is why we need encouragers. Not somebody to be constantly telling us everything that is wrong, but somebody to come alongside us and say, “you can do it.” Somebody to say, “God is good and wants the best for you. Somebody to say, “I have a vision for you.” Isn’t that what this prayer is: a vision of a blessed life, blessed by God.

Embedded in the middle of this wonderful prayer of encouragement is a single request, and part of one word can be underlined within the sentence expressing what Paul wants for his friends. *that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man*, And the one word? STRENGTH.

What’s the one reason to encourage others? To help give them STRENGTH. What is one of the greatest needs we have in this world: STRENGTH. Our lives are plagued with emotional weakness, worries, doubts, feeling out of control, uncertainty.

What is the gift of encouragement: An encourager brings unity because you are instantly not alone; an encourager prays for God’s blessings; an encourager has a God given vision for you. I am convinced that as Paul prays this prayer he is seeing his **discouraged** friends the way God sees them: strong, confident, purposeful. If you have an encourager in your life, that encourager sees you as a strong person. **You may not feel strong, you may argue, but listen to the encouragers God has put in your life, don’t listen to the inner demons, the inner voices, the evil people in your life, but rather listen to the encouragers, God’s vision, God’s blessing, the strength that comes through knowing somebody cares, knowing that God cares.**

The person with the God blessed gift of encouragement is committed to the spiritual growth of the people around them. Not everyone can see through the eyes of others, **but encouragers can.**

Encouragers know what I need, they are real, not the phony sort of encouragement that endorses everything I do like I can do no wrong...but real encouragement that affirms the present but dreams for the future. Encouragement is not simply a matter of affirming what people are, but also seeing them for what they will be in Christ Jesus. It's a matter of strength from the inside out - Eph 3.16b, *“in your inner man”*) through Christ.

Eph. 3:17-19 *“¹⁷that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height ¹⁹to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”*

To focus on Christ and to understand even a bit more the depth and breadth of Christ is to grow spiritually. The word *“rooted”* is used, which is one of our great needs, so we aren't floundering around. The word *“established”* is used, so we aren't shooting arrows into the air hoping we hit something good. The word *“power”* is used which goes along with the need for an inner strength, through Christ.

An encourager can see through the eyes of others, sees what God wants for them, blesses them for who they are but envisions a greater future, and is committed to helping others grow in Christ. One more amazing attitude of encouragers.

An encourager sees the trials of life as an opportunity to grow in their faith. This entire prayer of Paul is based on the fact that God can and will **use our weakness to strengthen us in our faith**. The Lord will use the weakness of our bodies, the weakness of our lives, to demonstrate his glory, so that others will be able to see the strength of Christ in us *“he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being.”* Your life is the stage upon which Christ is to be glorified in the world. The transforming power of Christ put on display in your life. Talk about being in a front row seat for God!

There's the vision, there's the tremendous need for the gift of encouragement: to bless others, look through their eyes, envision their life as God sees them, pray for strength, pray for spiritual growth as the trials of life are transformed into God's glory revealed within and to be able to see the beauty of others as God sees them.

I want West Side to be a place of encouragement where new people can come just as they are and be accepted. As they work and worship with us they can see God's vision of strength, a vision of transformation in their own life. I want West Side to be that same place. One of the great needs of our world is to encourage each other. Those of you who have the natural gift of encouragement need to show the rest of us. You keep encouraging the rest of us to be encouragers through your example, through your reminders. We need to be a community where those who are weak find the strength of Christ, a place "where never is heard, a discouraging word."

One more note. Do my words sound like a pipedream? Are you so discouraged with your own life, or the ugliness of the world we live in that you have doubts your world can change for the better? Look at Paul's next word: READ Eph. 3:20-21. ***"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*** HE IS ABLE.

We who are in Christ, do not have to live with crossed fingers, we do not need hollow words of encouragement. When I was a kid the highest ideal was to know you could grow up to be President of the United States... (how the world is different). The truth is that I can't do anything I set my heart on... I can only do that which God wills for my life. The quest is not to be convinced I can do anything, but rather, be willing to allow whatever God wants for me. When a person with a gift for encouragement encourages me, the encourager points to Christ, not an inner strength, not the power of your brain, not the situation of life, but simply pointing to Jesus and his ability to do anything he wants in those of us who will bend our will to His.

“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

May the encouragers among us practice their gift liberally and keep the rest of us focused on affirming the good in our community. May lives be transformed as people hear what God thinks about them, a wonderful vision of a strengthened life. May nobody be overwhelmed by their own weakness but hear a message of encouragement that God accepts them and loves them and has more in store for them. The unity, the strength, the blessing, the spiritual growth, the glory of Christ that comes through encouragement. God truly able to do ***exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think***