



Today most of us here are 49er fans; not an unusual thing to say at CPC on a Sunday morning in the fall. But I have to say today is an unusual day. There is a special bonding that is happening between you and me today. At 5:30 this evening the Green Bay Packers host the Seattle Seahawks. And being a Packer fan I just had to remind you that today we are all Green Bay Packer fans! So today we are one.

Years ago, during a practice session for the Green Bay Packers, things were not going well for Vince Lombardi's team. Lombardi singled out one big guard for his failure to "put out." It was a hot, muggy day when the coach called his guard aside and leveled his awesome vocal guns on him, as only Lombardi could. "Son, you are a lousy football player. You're not blocking, you're not tackling, you're not putting out. As a matter of fact, it's all over for you today, go take a shower." The big guard dropped his head and walked into the dressing room. Forty-five minutes later, when Lombardi walked in, he saw the big guard sitting in front of his locker still wearing his uniform. His head was bowed and he was sobbing quietly in discouragement.

Vince Lombardi, always the compassionate warrior, did something of an about face that was typical of him. He walked over to his football player and put his arms around his shoulder. "Son," he said, "I told you the truth. You are a lousy football player. You're not blocking, you're not tackling, you're not putting out. However, in all fairness to you, I should have finished the story. Inside of you, son, there is a great football player, and I'm going to stick by your side until the great football player inside of you has a chance to come out and assert himself."

With these encouraging words, Jerry Kramer straightened up and felt a great deal better. As a matter of fact, he felt so much better he went on to become one of the all-time greats in football and was recently voted the all-time guard in the first 50 years of professional football (from Sermon Central).

Everyone Needs Encouragement

We are wired to give and receive encouragement. I heard great reports about your 3-year anniversary celebration you had last week. I'm sure many of you walked away encouraged because you saw God working.

I remember my very first church in Rochester, Minnesota. Virtually right out of seminary I was the first pastor of a small group with a big vision. We were a church plant. I remember

how big a step it was for us, a young family, to make the move to a small town in Minnesota to become a first pastor to this group of 15 families. I remember celebrating with them as we began our ministry together. I remember one core couple—Terry and Jean—who basically had the vision to plant this new church welcoming us with open arms. We were young and scared and excited. We were trusting God. We trusted these core families that they were hearing from God, and they trusted us that we were hearing from God.

Later I remember a particular time at that church when Julie and I were discouraged. We were probably more homesick than anything. I remember one friend taking me out to coffee and he said to me, "Dan, I remember a year before you got here, Terry and Jean would host a prayer meeting every Friday night for this new church. And I would try to be there to support. I remember one Friday night I was late and as I drove up the driveway I noticed that there were no other cars. I thought that they cancelled, but I went up to the door anyway. They had the door open and I looked through the screen door and I saw Terry sitting in his chair in his living room with a circle of empty chairs around him with his head bowed in prayer. At that point I knew that with leaders like Terry and Jean this church was going to take off, that we were going to reach people for Jesus, and I knew that we would one day have a pastor."

How Do We Encourage?

When my friend told me the story, I was encouraged. Inspiring words backed by solid action and persevering prayer are some reoccurring ways I have been encouraged over the years. Maybe that's been the formula for encouragement for you as well. Encouragement isn't something to take lightly. Whether you are a big underachieving offensive guard or a young shaky pastor, everyone needs encouragement and everyone needs to know how to encourage.

I think it is interesting that Paul felt the need to spell out encouragement in his introduction of his letter to the Romans. Last week we learned that Paul gave himself the title servant or slave. And he goes on to tell us that God gave him another title, Apostle, one set apart for the gospel. He taught us that this gospel came from God, and was promised by the Old Testament prophets, and that this gospel is a person, not a religion or philosophy. And this person is Jesus (literally Savior), Christ (literally anointed king), and our Lord (literally sovereign ruler). This

gospel places demands on us that are healthy and healing but they require faith, trust and surrender; that placing our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord sets us apart into an awesome new reality. We become as Paul says, "wholly owned by God, loved deeply, and set apart as saints." Paul goes on to say that his purpose is to preach this Good News.

In verses 1-7 Paul shows his audience that this Good News is a reason to be encouraged. Today as we look at verses 8-15 Paul continues to give us more reasons to be encouraged, but he also shows us how we can be encouragers to others. Verse 8 says,

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.

It's important to remember that Paul had never met these Christians in Rome. He didn't plant this church. The church was likely started by a Jewish believer who went to Rome after Pentecost and the believers were likely meeting in several house churches as Paul wrote this letter. But you can see by verse 8 that he was encouraged. He knew that they had it rough in Rome, but by their deep faith, literally "faith by faith," one coming to faith and sharing with another and on and on, the church was growing and it was being reported all over the Roman world.

When we read the letter in its entirety we will eventually see the grand theology. Paul has a lot to say, but he begins with very tender words, "I thank my God." It tells me that if we are going to be encouragers we need to reveal our own hearts before we reveal what we know in our minds.

Paul I'm sure had his own reputation in the Roman world. No doubt people saw him with the zeal of a prophet, the great mind of a teacher, and the amazing determination as an Apostle, but he also needed to share with his readers the heart of a shepherd. Maybe there was some uneasiness in these Roman believers. Maybe he needed to respond to the question, "Paul, if you cared so much, why haven't you visited us?"

Did you see Paul's particular phrasing, "my God"? No good law-following Jew or Roman pagan would ever see their god so personal. Paul is revealing to them that it's through Jesus Christ, "the eternal mediator between God and man," that allows him to refer to God as "My God."

Then he gave thanks. The specific reason Paul gives thanks is because news of their deep faith was spreading all over the Roman world. This was good Christian gossip doing its thing.

Encouragement Flows from Thankfulness

Some of us have a lot to say. When we talk to others what kind of words seem to dominate? Is our natural tendency to praise or criticize? Is it to focus on faults or is it to focus on virtues? Every church has something they are known for. Not something they stand for, but something they are known for. What is it that we

are known for? If your life was reported all up and down the peninsula? What would be the gossip that spread? Would it be good gossip? Would you be seen as an encourager? If you are not sure, and you would like to have the reputation of being an encourager, consider how you can be a more thankful person. I'll give you a hint. It starts with remembering the generosity of God.

Encouragers are thankful and they also pray. Look at verses 9-10.

God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

He starts out with a solemn oath, God as my witness...you don't know me, I've never lived with you... but I do care about you spiritually, and before God I don't just say, prayin' for ya! Paul says he serves. One of the ways he serves is to pray. Paul sees it as important that they know that they are being prayed for. I guess an option is to secretly pray. But Paul knows that letting somebody know that he is praying is a source of encouragement.

Verse 10 ends with another prayer. This one Paul is praying for himself. It appears there is an ache in Paul's heart for two reasons. First, it's obvious, he longs to see these Christians in Rome. He has something for them and they likely have something to encourage Paul. The other thing, if we were to jump to chapter 15, we find out that Paul not only wanted to visit Rome, but he had his eye on a new mission field. He wanted to use Rome as a launching point to preach the gospel in Spain.

We can find out a lot about where a person's heart is when we ask them to share their prayer requests with us. I tell that to Community Group leaders and table leaders. Key in on what people want prayer for; it will give you a starting point for how to shepherd someone and help them grow.

Encouragement Flows from Prayer

This week I read a story that encouraged my own faith. There was a front page article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about a metro-transit operator named Linda Wilson-Allen. She loves the people who ride her bus, learns their names, and waits for them if they're late and then makes up the time later on her route. A woman in her eighties named Ivy had some heavy grocery bags and was struggling with them, so Linda got out of the driver's seat to carry Ivy's grocery bags onto the bus. Ivy lets other buses pass her stop so she can ride on Linda's bus.

When she doesn't see her regulars at that stop she will honk her horn and they come running down from their apartment so they don't miss the bus. One morning Linda saw a woman named Tanya at the bus stop. She could tell Tanya was new to the area and she was lost. It was almost Thanksgiving, so Linda said to Tanya, "You're out here all by yourself. You don't know anybody. Come on over for Thanksgiving and kick it with me and the kids."

Now they're friends. Linda has built such a little community of blessing on that bus that passengers give her flowers and scarfs and offer Linda the use of their vacation homes.

This does not sound like your typical bus driver! You are probably thinking, "How does she have this attitude?" Here's what the *Chronicle* states, "Her mood is set at 2:30 A.M. when she gets down on her knees to pray for 30 minutes." Why does she pray? The article quotes her, "'there is a lot to talk about with the Lord.' When she gets to the end of her line, she always says, 'That's all. I love you. Take care.'" Have you ever had a bus driver tell you, "I love you"? If you are wondering, "Where can I be encouraged in my faith?" I'll tell you where—on the #45 bus riding through San Francisco. People think, "Where can I find people like Apostle Paul?" I'll tell you where—behind the wheel of a metro bus.

So we encourage each other by being thankful, through prayer. Then in verses 11-12 encouragement flows from sharing spiritual gifts.

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

In the original language it expresses a very intense yearning with some regret that what he wanted hadn't happened yet. What does this mean? The Bible tells us that spiritual gifts come from God and they are distributed by God through the Holy Spirit as God determines. Paul will tell us more about God giving spiritual gifts in chapter 12. Here Paul is talking about spiritual gifts that have been given to Paul by God and that Paul longs to impart the blessing of his spiritual gifts to these Roman believers. Paul is saying he longs to use his God-given spiritual gifts to bless them. It's Paul using his preaching gift, his evangelism gift, and even his encouragement gift, to bless them and make the church strong.

Then it's as if he stops and thinks, wow, I don't want them to get the wrong impression. This isn't just me blessing you with my gifts. It's being mutually encouraged. It's you blessing me as well. When we are using our spiritual gifts we bless and we are blessed.

If you want to be an encourager, you must know your spiritual gifts, and not just know them but put them to use as well.

Encouragement Flows from Sharing Spiritual Gifts

Every summer CPC provides a class called SHAPE. It's a 5-week class designed to help us identify our spiritual gifts, understand our heart passions, study our natural talents, weigh in on our personality type, as well as our experiences, and how God uses all these to paint a picture of what he made us to be and how we can serve him in order to encourage and be encouraged. When we are using our spiritual gifts we mutually encourage each other and make the church strong.

Some of us today may be feeling discouraged. Some of us could be discouraged about our health. Some discouraged about our family, or some discouraged about our work. Others of us may be discouraged about our spiritual service. We compare ourselves to gifted musicians, or to gifted Bible Study leaders, or to those who are so generous with their time and their talents. Some of us think that we have nothing to offer. We need to realize that every Christian is qualified to carry out at least one helpful ministry—the ministry of encouragement. Even if you have nothing else to give, you can give encouragement. Our mutual faith gives us a common commitment and a common purpose for encouraging one another.

Encouragement Flows from a Heart for Helping People Grow

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome (verses 13–15).

The word for harvest is literally fruit. The fruit that he hopes to obtain is the result of ministry—more converts through belief in Jesus and more Christians living in obedience as a result of their growing faith. He wants to evangelize and disciple the city. Then he goes on to explain his heart for his ministry. Literally to both the Greek and the non-Greek speaking world, literally barbarian world: I am under obligation. Literally I am in debt to all people.

There is more than one kind of debt. The common debt would be how much I still owe the bank for my condo. I am indebted to the bank to pay the money back in only 360 more monthly payments. Paul's debt is of another kind. If someone were to give me money to deliver to someone else, I am indebted to the one who gave me the money and, in a real sense, to the one who should receive it. As the middle man, I am a debtor to both. Paul is writing, "I have been given the good news of the Savior, Himself, and I have the responsibility—a debt to pay—to give this news to someone else." It's important to point out that this debt was not a condition of Paul's salvation. Paul didn't see himself as a debtor because he owed the Lord anything in return for eternal life. Paul's debt was a voluntary condition of his calling. It was a deep sense of accountability to the fate of his fellow human beings that they would come to Christ and grow spiritually.

Let me try to further illustrate the obligation idea. One day a man was heading home from work. He got off the train and started walking toward his home. On the side of the road there was a shaggy little dog sitting there. The dog was obviously homeless, hungry and in desperate need of a bath and a good meal. The

man did what many other people refused to do that afternoon. He took the dog home with him. He delayed his dinner to give the dog a needed bath and try to untangle his knotted fur. He didn't have any dog food so he shared some of his own with the little pup.

The man then put up signs trying to find the dog's owner but no one responded. He went to the pet store and bought him a new bed and his own shiny dog collar. The owner had a new name engraved on his dog tag. It was Spike. He wanted to give the little guy a bit more confidence.

Over time the little dog added some much needed pounds, grew in strength and confidence. Every night when he returned from work Spike was right there wagging his tail waiting to greet the man at the door.

One day the man came home from work and Spike was nowhere to be found. It had been over a month since he rescued Spike, but this evening he was gone. The house seemed lonely; it wasn't the same with Spike gone. So the man made dinner just for himself and had just sat down to eat when he heard the familiar bark of Spike just outside his front door. When he opened the door there was Spike, but Spike wasn't alone. Now that Spike was in a healthy place he went back to the streets and found all his: hurting, dirty, lonely, unconfident friends and told them about the man. Spike knew one thing: he couldn't keep the secret of the man to himself; he was obligated to share it with others.

Why? Because Good News is to be shared, not kept to ourselves. Sure, we are not commissioned in the same way as Paul, but like him, we are under an obligation to make Jesus and his Good News known to others.

You want to become an encourager? It flows from hearts that love people, that feel an obligation to encourage their hurting, dirty, lonely and unconfident friends. If you don't have any hurting, dirty, lonely and unconfident friends that's another message for another day.

Remember, you are a follower of Jesus Christ. That means that Jesus Christ is alive and living in you. It's not about having all

the right answers to all the possible questions people ask. Certainly we need to know something about what it means to be a Christian, and how to help someone become one. But it's also about simply connecting with people and loving them. One thing I do know about this obligation that Paul feels: None of us have an excuse to do and say nothing while the world around us is dying. Want to be an encourager? Then share the good news.

Can you think of anyone at church who could use some encouragement from you? Can you think of anyone at your workplace that could use some encouragement from you? Can you think of anyone in your family, at your school, in your neighborhood that could use some encouragement from you?

Does everyone have someone in mind? This week I want to challenge you to follow Paul's encouragement example in Romans. Let someone lean on you this week. Here is how:

- Express how thankful you are to God and then express to this someone how thankful you are for them in your life.
- Pray for this someone who needs encouragement, and then tell them you are praying for them. But for heaven sake, don't forget to pray for them!
- Use your spiritual gifts to impart ministry to this someone who needs your unique God-given SHAPE to bless their lives.
- Encourage this someone by actually caring about their own spiritual growth. Feel obligated to gently share the good news with your someone, if they don't know Christ. Feel obligated as Paul did and then encourage your someone to grow in the deeper and wonderful things of our faith that we will be learning in Romans. Then invite this someone to a group that you are connected to.

It is both a great privilege and great responsibility to be encouragers.

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

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