

We are currently in our summer series called, Revive: A Summer of Blessing and Growth. In the first half of this series, we are reading several prayers of blessing called benedictions. The term benediction literally means good speech. In this message, we look at a good speech of encouragement. 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’s a gift you give, which empowers another person.

It’s powerful how encouragement works. I remember this one time when my dad encouraged me. It’s amazing the power of encouragement because I will never forget it. I had completed all my education for the pastorate. I was pastoring at a church, and while doing that, I had gone through a pretty intense ordination process for my particular denomination. After completing my work, the ordination team voted to ordain me. Julie threw a celebration party for the occasion with cake and punch in our fellowship hall. Before the cake and punch, we had a service where our denominational leader, my elders, and friends said some encouraging word. All of them had wonderful things to say, but for the life of me, I can’t remember what they said. What I do remember is what my dad said. He stood up and announced I was his son, and he loved me, and God had given me a calling. He said he was proud of me.

Now you need to understand that my dad was a scientist and an engineer. During his career, he designed instruments for NASA and medical devices, which saved lives. I, on the other hand, didn’t inherit his science gene. Yet, as much as he might have wanted me to follow in his footsteps, he never pressured me. He only encouraged me in my own strengths. I will never forget the power of that moment of encouragement.

I thought of the moment when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan. The moment when Jesus came up out of the water and His Father’s voice came down from heaven saying, “This is my son. I love Him. Listen to what he says,” to paraphrase. My own father, on the day of my ordination, said three powerful things, which continues to encourage me. He said, “He is my Son. I love him. I am proud of what he does.”

Everyone Needs Encouragement to Revive the Soul

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

encouraged you. Was it a week ago? A month ago? Can you even remember? Encouragement is a blessing each of us can give to another to make their life better, yet we are stingy about giving out this blessing.

This message of encouragement from Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17 is for all of us, male, female, young, old, single, or married. Every one of us needs encouragement. Some of us here today are starved for affirmation from those whose opinion matters most to us. I’m so sorry for so many of you who suffer because those who were supposed to encourage you did not. I’m sure Father’s Day reminds some of you here today of the painful times in your life when the most important man in your life, your own father, did not encourage you.

But I want you to be hopeful this morning. If your earthly father or mother or any other authority figures in your life didn’t fill your soul, know God is here to encourage you this morning.

And kids of every age need courage and hope, too. I think it’s safe to say there are pressures and demands on children these days, which make encouragement essential for survival.

Since this message is on Father’s Day, I want to sprinkle throughout it some specific encouragements to men who fill strategic roles as dads, grandfathers, and mentors. Whether it’s your influence in church, in your home, or in your workplace, one of the primary ways God grows great families, churches, and secure adults is by using men and dads to share the blessing of encouragement.

My prayer is for two things. First, that everyone reading this message will soak up encouragement from God. We need it. And second, I pray specifically for men to bless those in their lives through the power of encouragement.

The Apostle Paul started many new churches. Paul was literally the spiritual dad to hundreds of Christians during the years of his missionary journeys. One church he started was in a bustling and diverse city named Thessalonica. Thessalonica was a port city on the Aegean Sea. It was the capital of ancient Macedonia, which is present-day northern Greece.

While Paul was starting a church in Corinth, he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to check in this new little church. Timothy came back and gave Paul a report, which prompted Paul to write his first letter to the Thessalonians and encourage them in their faith. A couple of years later Paul got word the little church was discouraged. It was as if the devil himself was tormenting them.

They were suffering. They thought the end of the world was near. They needed encouragement. They needed an encouraging letter from their spiritual dad. And that leads us to this wonderful passage of Scripture, 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17. Let's all soak up this encouragement.

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. (2 Thessalonians 2:13)

So the first thing Paul did was thank God for those in the little church. He said despite their persecutions and difficulties they were continually loved and continually prayed for. And even though dark forces seemed to have the upper hand, Paul said to not fear those who try to hurt them, and don't fear the devil who sought to harm them. Why? Because they were loved by God. Paul said they were his brothers and sisters, loved by God. He continued and told them not to fear because they were chosen.

The word chose is past tense and literally means to be taken or picked by God as first fruits from the beginning of time before the foundation of the world. Taken or picked for what?

The Bible consistently teaches us that our salvation comes from God, not from our own merits. Salvation begins and ends with God. Our place in salvation is for us to freely accept God's gift of salvation, by believing the truth. The means God uses to bring about our salvation is the work of His Holy Spirit. And those who believe in Christ, receive the Holy Spirit who teaches us, leads us, encourages us, and transforms us to think and act like Christ as we believe and obey God's truth. Paul went on to say...

He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (verse 14)

So Paul said, even though they were chosen before the beginning of time, God called them through the preaching of the gospel, actually through Paul's preaching of the gospel in that particular time and place. And through that preaching, God called, and they answered. If that is not enough for Paul to give thanks for them, there is more.

Paul is telling us to be encouraged. All God has done for us and continues to do in our life brings God glory, and then Paul is saying to be encouraged as there is more. In the future, we will share in the glory of God. Our future will not be judgment; it will be sharing in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So be encouraged today by your spiritual dad, Paul. Celebrate these truths, which apply to you this morning. And then take these truths and "pay it forward." Encourage someone else by celebrating the truth of the amazing privileges God has given them.

Encouragers Celebrate the Truth

Dads, celebrate the true strengths of your kids. If your child brings home five A's and one C, celebrate the A's. Secular research from the Gallup organization demonstrates we can improve the performance of a "would be" leader far more easily by celebrating his or her strengths and building on those, rather than we can by critiquing weaknesses. Why? Because identifying what is right and noble in another person gives the person inner strength and hope needed for the fight against what is not right or noble.

What if dads, moms, mentors, or coaches went home and wrote notes of encouragement to their kids, telling them what they celebrate in them? It would be like our letter from our spiritual dad we are reading this morning. Some of you are thinking, "If my father had done that for me, it would have been like living water to me." May God give you the courage to pay forward what your spiritual Dad celebrates, and not what your earthly dad didn't celebrate about you.

Celebrating the truth and celebrating our strengths feel really good to us. But Paul tells us there are other ways to encourage as well. We can encourage by challenging them to build upon their strengths. Let's look together at verse 15.

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)

The truth of knowing the glory of our future can bring a kind of endurance to help us through our difficult circumstances. This letter from our spiritual dad tells us to not be frightened by the magnitude of the opposition we face, and don't be unsettled by the lack of specifics of how things are going to roll out for us tomorrow, a week from now, a month, or a year. Instead, stand firm. Stand firm on what? On what God has established for us in verses 13–14.

Paul was encouraging them by challenging them. Paul challenged them to stand firm and not to let go of the teachings they passed on to them, whether it was something they read in one of his letters or what he shared with them when he was there preaching to them in person.

Encouragers Challenge Others to Stand Firm in the Truth

I love that Paul was writing these encouraging words from a place of empathy for what the Thessalonians were enduring. Paul understood the pressures of their trials and the strong dark forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The verses right before this passage are words of warning from Paul telling us that the devil at work in the world. And the words right after

this passage are in chapter three and are instructions from Paul about how to persevere in the present.

It is no shock to anyone when I tell you the next generation is under immense pressure and danger of being swept away into discouragement, even despair, by the currents of our Bay Area culture. Our natural instinct as dads want to encourage, maybe to coddle, or protect our kids from these secular forces. But as Paul shows us here, there are times when the best avenue of encouragement is not to coddle, but to challenge one another to stand firm in truth against these forces.

Every semester, my wife Julie, in my opinion, one of the greatest elementary teachers in the world, puts together her grade comments for her students and parents. She has me read over them as a second set of eyes before she sends them out. There is a particularly challenging thing she said to the kids who needed encouragement. It wasn't so challenging that it could break their spirits; instead, it fed their spirits. She wrote, "I wouldn't challenge you if I didn't believe in you."

I am almost certain Julie doesn't know of Jim Valvano, the highly successful head basketball coach of North Carolina State University from 1980 through 1990. In 1983 he won the NCAA national championship. Jim said this about his own father. May fathers be equipped by Jim's words. He said, "My father gave me the greatest gift anyone could give another person. He believed in me."

Do the people in our lives we are called to encourage need to see a challenge from us? Do the people we are called to encourage need to see from us a belief in them that they can "rise and stand firm" against something that looks impossible?

Dads, and moms and mentors believe in those you care about. It's a great gift of encouragement to be believed in. And then encourage those you believe in with a challenge... a challenge that won't break them, but a challenge, which will build their strength.

So Paul began this passage with a prayer of thanks, and he concluded it by encouraging them with a specific prayer of encouragement.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us (verse 16a)

The order of putting Jesus Christ first makes it clear Paul saw the Son and the Father as one, and regarded them as equally worthy. He prayed to God the Son and God the Father.

"...*who loved us*." Literally past tense, he loved us by carrying out one huge past completed action. What was the past-completed action? Jesus' death on the cross of Calvary and his resurrection three days later was this great past act, which opens up for us a relationship with God. He loved us. And this love keeps on giving. He loved us not only by paying for all our past sins, but also paying for our present sin and our future sin as well. And God continues to love us even when we disappoint him. Can you

imagine that? That is a mark of a good father. Even when our kids disappoint, we continue to love them anyway. This phrase, "*who loved us*" has become more and more a treasured thought for me. Let's soak in this encouragement from God. To be loved by the Lord means we are supported, day in and day out, by God's love. And that God chose not to measure His love for me in words, but in His blood. Bring this thought to your mind many times each day until it becomes a regular part of your thinking and living.

...and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement (verse 16b)

This means what he is about to say is a gift, which keeps on giving. The Greek word for encouragement here gets lost in the English translation. The Greek carries the meaning of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit coming alongside to strengthen and encourage and support, like a counselor living in us. It's eternal which means it will never be weakened or withdrawn through any circumstances. And there is more.

...and good hope, (verse 16c)

He gave us hope that is not wishful thinking, but Biblical hope, which carries a confidence and assurance. It never disappoints. Why? Because this kind of hope is built on God's trustworthy nature and his trustworthy promises. In the face of difficulties, discouragements, persecution, and shattered dreams, God brings the power of encouragement through the presence of the Holy Spirit to come alongside you and...

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

Paul's prayer for us is that we will recognize this God who loves us, and we will embrace the Holy Spirit who comes alongside us to encourage us. Paul prayer is also that we will open our hearts to the good hope God gives us, which encourages us and strengthens us so we can stand up to the difficulties in this life. And not just stand up to those difficulties, but to thoughtfully and graciously engage our culture with good deeds and good words for those around us as God opens paths for us.

And an important outcome of all of this encouragement from God is the work of God opens doors for us to practice truth. God encourages us by clearing a path for us to practice truth. And here is how God cleared the path.

Since the fall of Adam and Eve, God looked upon his children and knew there was no path they themselves could clear to practice truth. Every path man has tried to clear and venture down, ends up a dead end. Every path man conceives as a way to get to God is blocked by sin and death. But God loves us in spite of our failures, so much so that God sent His son to earth.

His love shown at Calvary, demonstrated by his shed blood, punched a hole in the barriers of sin and death. It cleared a path to save us, empower us, and encourage us so we can celebrate the truth of what God has done, and to be challenged to stand

firm in that truth. We are also tasked to help others see the open path and to know the truth that encourages us.

Paul explained the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people in Thessalonica, and the people responded and believed. The people who believed were then empowered to practice the truth of God. As we see in Jesus and we see in Paul.

Encouragers Clear Paths for Others to Practice Truth

So in the same way, as a Christian and as a dad, I am called to encourage by clearing paths for those around me. I clear paths by imitating Christ and opening my life so others can see me, not as a perfect man, but as a man with my own set of challenges and weakness who seeks to live by faith, and who knows he is dependent on God's grace every day.

When the next generation sees you serious about imitating Christ, they are encouraged to imitate what they see, and you will open up paths for them to follow Christ.

Dads, your children watch you, and they imitate you. They will imitate the good they see, or they will imitate the bad that they see. They will absorb you like little sponges, the good, the bad and the ugly. John Wooden, a Christian man, and another highly successful basketball coach, said this about the power of encouraging by example. "The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother."

So what are some practical ways we can encourage those we care about? We encourage people when we stop discouraging them. I've heard it takes about seven affirmations to make up for one discouraging criticism. Stop tearing down those people you are called to encourage. Do we see Paul saying anything discouraging in our passage this morning? We do not.

Paul in a letter to the Ephesian church said this specifically to dads. "Fathers, do not exasperate your children instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

Paul is saying, it's right to challenge our children with truth, but it's wrong to live our own life in such a confusing way that it puts up obstacles to our child's path of faith development.

We encourage those we are called to encourage toward love and good deeds by our own love and good deeds. We encourage by seeing potential in people and letting them know we see it.

We want to challenge you this morning to put this benediction of encouragement into practice by imitating Paul. We encourage you to write your own blessing of encouragement to someone in your life. We would also love to share in your experience. A few weeks ago in Take 5, we asked you to text the word BLESSING to 43506. If you haven't done that, do it right now, or refer to your digital bulletin for instructions. If you do this, you will get a text reminder from us to text in a blessing. Throughout our summer series, we hope to post many of your blessings anonymously on social media so we can hear your story of what it means to you to receive or give a blessing.

For those of us who are not as drawn to Father's Day sports quotes and analogies, let me sum this message up with another story about the power of encouragement. There was a famous painter named Benjamin West who told how he loved to paint as a youngster. When his mother left, he would pull out all the oils and try to paint. One day he pulled out all the paints and made quite a mess. He hoped to get it all cleaned up before his mother came back, but she came home before everything was cleaned.

West said what his mom did next completely surprised him. She picked up his painting and said, "My, what a beautiful painting of your sister." She gave him a kiss and walked away. With that kiss, West says, he became a painter.

Every day, you and I are trying to paint a picture of Jesus in our lives through what we do and what we say. But we make messes. The last thing we need is someone to come along and say, "What a mess!" What we need is a kiss of encouragement. Thank you, Jesus, for your kiss of grace every day as we try to paint our picture of you. And thank you, Jesus, for those you put in our lives who need from us kisses of encouragement in their messes.

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

© 2018 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1438-3FC