

Closing the Gap - Week 15 Notes

Sunday, April 15, 2018

<http://www.rivercc.org/2018/04/15/closing-the-gap-week-15-notes/>

1. INTRO

I don't know why I underestimated the power of words for so long.

I had experienced their power personally throughout my life...but somehow there was a disconnect in my thinking.

Some of you know the story of me sitting on my parent's porch my freshman year of college on a Sunday evening...dreading the coming week.

Feeling like a failure, wanting to quit college, wanting to leave town...feeling lower than I ever had...my dad sat on the step and spoke simple words of encouragement to me.

-A sentence or two.

-They had transformational impact on me...on the course of my life.

In seminary after college...I felt like a fish out of water...I was not an academic...grades had always been a necessary evil for staying eligible to play sports...the real reason I was even in school...so sorry to all you teachers who have to put up with students like me

I felt like I didn't belong in these Master's classes with all these theologians and scholars...I was insecure and out of place.

One semester I had a professor in my class write a note on a paper I had written encouraging me in my education...casting vision for me that I didn't remotely have for myself.

I was shocked...I seriously looked to see if I have been given someone else's paper by mistake.

Because on my own paper I would have not been surprised to see a note saying "Why exactly are you here?"

But that small encouragement along with others like it help shaped my future choices.

I could go on...but I could also tell you of words that were enormously discouraging.

One that stands out is when I was told by a person I respected who hadn't seen me in a couple of years "Well, you haven't changed."

Yes...I had changed...but he didn't see it...and those words set me back.

We all have stories...stories of empty words that do nothing, death words that kill courage, and words that bring life and courage.

But still I doubted the power of **words**...because I was not seeing them correctly...as an essential part of a whole.

By themselves they are not enough to bring change...but that's like saying that because air by itself won't keep you alive (you also need food, water) air is not powerful or important or necessary for life.

Encouraging words are powerful and vital...along with other things we need...they are essential for us to thrive.

Sigmund Freud discovered that merely talking to his patients in certain ways could sometimes relieve symptoms of emotional distress and this puzzled him.

He believed that people are merely complex biological things and that minds are only complex chemical reactions.

So problems like anxiety, depression, and phobias are only physical disorders that are treated through medical intervention.

He was shocked when certain kinds of words...sometimes helped people profoundly.

If he had read(and believed) Proverbs he might have not have been so shocked.

The tongue has the power of life and death. 18:21

Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up. 12:25

The soothing tongue is a tree of life. 15:4

Gracious words are sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. 16:24

James wrote that the tongue is small but it can determine the entire course of human existence.

I've learned personally that listening to their story and offering simple encouraging words can help people with trauma.

Words are powerful.

This year we are closing the gap on faith and love.

This spring season we are looking at 8 of the "one anothers" from Scripture.

Last week: "Bear each other's burdens."

This week: "Encourage one another"

There are many scriptures that we could look at but we will focus on four passages this morning.

They will be the topic of small groups this week as well as the daily devotions for the week.

Regardless of our gifts, personality, training...we all have the privilege and responsibility to encourage one another.

Here's where we are going today:

1. **The content of encouragement: The Gospel**
2. **The impact of encouragement: Perspective and power for Christlikeness**
3. **The context of encouragement: A gospel community**
4. **The absolute demands of encouragement: Any, Only, Others**

Let's walk through these:

1. **The content of encouragement: The Gospel**

1Thess. 5:9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Paul bases the content of encouragement on the gospel message.

Christ followers are not going to suffer the wrath of God but rather salvation...whether we are awake or asleep (alive or dead)...we live together with him...**therefore(based on this fact)**...we are encourage and build each other up.

Our encouragement is substantial because it's independent of life or death circumstances.

In movies people will often say "It's going to be okay, I promise."

Or "I will come back to you, you have my word."

And the scriptwriter can ensure they keep their word.

The problem in real life is that these are promises that cannot be guaranteed...well-intentioned maybe but the future is not ours to control.

Or encouragement that is often given is something like "You will get through this" "you will be okay"

But it depends on the basis for those pronouncements and what is meant by them.

"You will get through this"...if that means the trouble will go away and you will be happy and stay happy...its shallow and unsubstantiated encouragement.

The encouragement that is substantial is based on the promises of God.

We don't have to obey fear we can obey God and we **will** be okay...okay in the ultimate sense...we will experience salvation...he will not leave us in life or death.

We don't have to worry whether all will be lost in the end, it will not.

We don't to wonder if we will be left alone in the future...we will not be.

So we can encourage one another to live a life of faithful obedience and know that it is substantial encouragement backed by the promises of the gospel...by God himself.

2. The impact of encouragement: Perspective and power for Christlikeness

Heb. 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Here we see the impact of regular encouragement is that we will NOT be hardened by the deceit of sin.

We are to "see to it"...make sure of it...be intentional that...our hearts do not turn away from God but are continually turning towards him.

How, specifically, are we to see to it?

Interesting that here its not prayer, bible study, worship...it is daily encouragement.

"See to it that you are not hardened...BUT (instead)...encourage one another daily."

Of course he is not saying prayer, scripture, worship are unimportant...but he is "foot stomping" the vital necessity of regular encouragement.

You will not do well for very long by yourself...even if you do spend lots of time alone with God.

If God put's you in a place where fellowship is unavailable...a prison isolation cell, a desert island...then he will surely meet your needs very directly.

But otherwise...he is going to meet your needs through the regular encouragement of others.

If you do not avail yourself of this resource from God...you will find yourself being hardened to the truth and to the reality of God.

Sin is deceitful...meaning of course...that it lies.

The Garden:

The enemy lied to the first couple (Adam and Eve)...and they bought that lie

And three things came with their purchase of that lie:

1. Fear "I was afraid"
2. Shame "I was naked"
3. Hiding from God "So I hid"

After they had rebelled they went into hiding.

God asked, "Where are you" ...not of course wondering their geographical location but their heart orientation.

Adam said, "We were hiding from you because we are afraid because we were naked."

Remember the fact of their nakedness had caused them no shame or fear up to this point.

But now in their sin they were afraid, ashamed and hiding from God.

Since then unredeemed humanity as a whole lives in a near constant state of:

-Fear

-Shame

-Hiding from God (often seen as rejecting him)

Encouragement speaks directly to this fear, shame and keeps us from going into hiding from God.

It can keep our hearts soft towards him, and turned towards him.

When we become discouraged...because we have lost sight of the reality of the Gospel and the truth of God...we are susceptible to the lies of sin.

And to the lies of our shame and our fears...and we so go into hiding.

And when we are hiding from God...we will begin sliding away from God...moving away from the reality of his power in our lives.

"I am a failure, why try?"

"This life is a lie, why live it?"

"I must look after me, I need to make me happy...selfishness will work after all."

"God is not coming through as promised"

On and on it goes...encouragement, specifically encouragement founded on the gospel...is the antidote to the deceitfulness of sin.

Then there is the context of gospel encouragement:

3. The context of encouragement: A gospel community (the church)

Heb. 10:23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

1. Hold unswervingly: a long walk in a single direction...life lived based on the hope of the gospel.
2. We are to consider how to spur one another on towards a life that expresses this gospel hope: specifically love expressed in action.

-"Spur" is used here...it can also be translated "stir one another up"

The word is used like someone "inciting an argument"...very direct, even harsh word...meant to grab attention.

Spur in the side of a horse...moves it to action...it can be uncomfortable.

Here is the idea is to "incite someone" not to anger but to love and good deeds...to action.

Very intentional, even aggressive in its meaning.

We want to "stir one another up to love expressed in action."

Then the warning..."Don't stop meeting together as some have done, but rather encourage one another."

It is stating the obvious...but sometimes the obvious needs to be stated.

We cannot encourage one another if we are not getting together with one another.

There must be encouraging **content**...the promises of God.

-So just to get together and not be intentional about the content is not going to have the best effects.

But there must be an encouraging **context**...time together with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Think of it like a coffee and a cup.

-Either one by themselves are useless...you need both together.

The cup is community; the gospel-based encouragement is the coffee if you will.

Then in all of this the demands of encouragement are absolute and centered on others.

4. The absolute demands of encouragement: Any, Only, Others

Eph. 4:29 "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

ANY

ONLY

OTHERS

Don't let ANY unwholesome words out of your mouth...only what is it helpful to build up...others.

-Unwholesome is word that means: putrid: death words

-Helpful is a word that means: good, wholesome: life words

For the needs of OTHERS

-Much of what we say is because we think we need to say, but we are to focus on saying what will benefit others.

This of course is not the same as "telling people what they want to hear."

It is telling people what they need to hear...sometimes it will be difficult words.

But what people need the most...is encouragement...according to their need to **hear** it not your need to **say it**.

This: ANY.ONLY.OTHERS...is a very high bar.

No death words, only life words...for the benefit of others...to meet their needs (not mine)

Is this even realistic?

Is a basketball coach realistic when he says "I want you to shoot that ball into that hoop every time."

He may be unrealistic to believe his team is going to shoot 100%...but he would be a terrible coach if he said "I don't think we can shoot 100% so, try to make 4 out of 10 shots."

So four times try to make a basket, 6 times, don't worry about...just toss it that general direction.

No the goal of ANY/ONLY/OTHERS is not unrealistic...it is a good goal...no death words, only life words...for their good not yours.

Any other goal would be a terrible goal indeed.

When we fail to reach the goal...we must repent and go back to closing the gap on the pursuit of the perfect goal...any, only, others.

APPLICATION:

Please don't hear "encouragement" as simply telling people things that make them feel better, or what they want to hear.

Encouragement is a word that can mean: implore, persuade, invite, beseech, beg...to pour courage in.

It can be words that inspire, challenge, understand, disagree, agree...there is no formula.

Remember we are to "spur" one another one...that's not the most comfortable idea I can think of...being "spurred."

But this is not dispassionate, clinical, laid back, nice people saying nice things so others will think they are nice.

A good friend responded with some passion to another person and wondered if he had been wrong about it...from my perspective he had not sinned, he had led.

I said "Lead, sometimes when you lead, people will not like it...but lead."

He said "Your right, I can't seem to separate my emotion from my mission."

I said "No one can...go lead."

But I could have said..."No one can, nor should we try."

We should not be angry, demanding, or demeaning...but we should be passionate about life, relationships, God.

This is about an engaged life on life commitment to helping others move towards Christ.

It takes nerve...courage to encourage well.

In his book "A failure of nerve" Ed Friedman, who consulted with the military, presidents, universities, churches and synagogues on the leadership...has as it's premise

"The real problem of leadership is a *failure of nerve*. Leaders fail not because they lack information, skill, or technique, but because they lack the nerve and presence to stand firm in the

midst of other people's emotional anxiety and reactivity."

Effective encouragement likewise requires nerve...courage.

This topic is quite large...if you want to read one good book on it I recommend: "Encouragement" Larry Crabb

Before I look at three final applications: Special marriage application:

-If you believe your spouse needs a rebuke, let someone else do it.

-Especially if you have a pattern of delivering more criticism than encouragement.

-Go on a criticism "fast" for a month (or a year or a lifetime)...speak encouragement into your spouse...and in a marriage...forget the "spurs"

Just focus on the positive.

"But I really need to tell her/him this...then I'll go positive."

I doubt it...what really needs to happen is your spouse needs to be encouraged by you...a lot.

Let's finish with three principles/applications:

- 1. Encouragement is not a technique it is at the core about a heart that is sensitive to God and others**

If you want to be an encourager, and I hope you do...start with your own heart.

This is not about perfection but direction...start with a heart that wants the glory of God and the good of others...or is moving that way.

Don't wait for heart change **before** you practice encouragement...practice encouragement and while you practice watch your heart...this needs to happen simultaneously and continuously.

As you seek to encourage others...and you should...pursue a heart from which encouragement flows as the power of God.

1Pet. 4:11 If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Again...don't wait to become perfect...move towards others...make some mistakes (not because you want to but because you will if you are active in this)

But do not neglect the heart...you can get more skilled at this and you should want to.

But it's not primarily about skill but about a heart that wants God's glory and the good of others...this will lead, over time, to words that have the power of God behind them.

People will feel more alive and have more courage by your words.

2. **Face the fear: yours and theirs**

Yours: to encourage others you must be willing to love them more than you want to be liked by them.

-Sometimes encouragement will not be what they want to hear and will take a long-term perspective.

-This is what Friedman calls the "well-differentiated person"

-Fancy way of saying what Paul said in Gal. 1:10

Gal. 1:10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Friedman's well differentiated person is one who makes choices based on their own sense of purpose and not what others want them to be or say.

Your sense of well-being, your choices, your very life...are not dependent on the opinions and choices of others...or what they demand you should do or be or say.

Do not obey your fear, obey love...encourage others according to their needs.

Their fear: Understand that some kind of fear is always present in the people we are encouraging.

-Don't play counselor with people...you don't have to mention fear but it is helpful to be aware that fear is always there at some level in people's lives.

So encouragement is: motivated by love, directed at fear

3. **If you want to be encouraged...go after it...don't wait for it to come to you.**

"See to it...that none of you has a heart that turns from God."

*I have never seen anyone who wants community enough to pay the price for it...fail to find it.

*I have never seen anyone who waits for community to happen to them...find it.

You have to opportunity and responsibility to help shape the lives of others for the glory of God and their good.

Do not underestimate this power.

Become an encourager...be encouraged by others.

Pursue others to encourage them...pursue others to be encouraged by them.

This is available for you...God is all for it...now it is up to you and me to "see to it."
