

Encouragement

Introduction

Pastor Viars is ministering at the CCEF conference this weekend, so he asked that I speak this morning. I would like to begin by having you turn to Nehemiah 4. Last week we began this series about six words that every relationship needs with the word “grace.”

- Every relationship needs grace instead of bitterness.
- I hope this week you were willing to give grace to those around you.

This morning we are going to talk about the power of encouragement.

In Nehemiah 4 we find a group of exiles, from the regions of Babylon, finally allowed to return home. They were led by Nehemiah in order to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem – the first step in the process of becoming a nation and renewing their covenant relationship with God.

- That sounds wonderful ...
- Here was the problem ... there were a lot of people who did not want to see the wall rebuilt and the nation established, so they began to mock the Jews. Nehemiah 4:1-3.
 - o In 500 BC that joke was hilarious!
- Nehemiah acts in the midst of their discouragement vv. 4-5.
- This results in even greater opposition vv. 7-8 ... vv. 9-11
 - o Do you hear the language and the discouragement among the people?
 - o They are beginning to doubt the validity of the whole project.
- Vv. 12-23

Do you get the picture? A hard task, with great opposition and threats. Yet, Nehemiah, the leader, encourages his crew to remain faithful to the Lord and to continue in the work as aggressively as possible.

- What is the result? An extraordinary accomplishment from ordinary people.
- Read Nehemiah 6:15-16.

I would like you to imagine with me what would happen if all of your relationships were characterized by this level and type of encouragement.

- What if in my home you were known as the encouragement leader?
- What if at my workplace you were known as the “son of encouragement” like Barnabas?
- What if my neighbors considered us an encouraging family and a huge asset to the neighborhood?
- What if in my ABF you were known as the person to go see for encouragement?

Would that be awesome or what? Is it possible that just in Nehemiah’s situation extraordinary things were happening in my home, workplace, neighborhood, and ABF?

- Can I suggest to you that harmony, unity, progressive sanctification, and moving forward would be a normal part of the equation in these relationships?

It is simply not very hard to establish the importance of this second word that every relationship needs: encouragement.

With that in mind I would like us to focus on our primary text this morning. Please turn to Ephesians 4:29.

As you are turning there I want to point out

Ephesians 4:1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,

- The “therefore” points back to all the blessings we have in Christ. [give the gospel here]
 - o Inheritance
 - o Blessed us with all spiritual blessings
 - o You were made alive though you were dead in trespasses and sins
 - o United with brothers and sisters in Jesus into one new body – the body of Christ
 - o Your redemption, your adoption, your reconciliation, your regeneration are all aspects of the blessings you have in Christ. As a result of all those truths you are called to live a worthy life.
- Manner in which you were called refers to the actions that you are supposed to take now that you are a genuine follower of Jesus.
 - o While we could list many of them, our goal this morning is focusing on just one aspect of that worthy life ... A life of encouragement.

Read Eph 4:29. I would like to organize my time dealing with the subject of encouragement into three basic points. The first of which is ...

I. Characteristics of Biblical Encouragement

A. Opposite of Destructive words

Eph 4:29 follows the pattern of all the verses in vv. 25-32. It shows what must be put off and then demonstrates in concrete action what must be put on instead.

- In v. 29 we see the put off side that of “unwholesome” words.
- We understand this phrase in terms of its opposite in the passage – words for edification or building up.
- In other words, the kind of words being discussed in this passage are the kind of words that hurt others in one form or another. Let’s identify a few types of those words...

1. Frontal Attack – Words that seek to hurt someone directly

As I think back over my life I can think of a number of times that I said something to someone where I meant to hurt them. **Proverbs 12:18 says “Wreckless words pierce like a sword but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”**

Maybe I shouldn’t admit that. But in my mind, there is no doubt that my words were being used as sword in order to inflict damage. These words were a frontal attack. Maybe you can think of incidents like that for you as well...

- To all you married persons ... I have heard many people say to their spouse words like, “I wish I had not married you.” “I think it would be best to get a divorce.” “I would be attracted to you if you lost 25 pounds.”
 - o Those words were meant to hurt and in the vast majority of the cases they do.

- Even if your attacks have not been that aggressive you can probably think of times where you said what you said in order to hurt your spouse.
- To all you parents ... Parents have told their children that “they would never amount to anything.” Parents have called their children “stupid, worthless, and annoying.”
 - Friends, those words crush your children.
- To you young people ... you have done the same thing with your parents. You know exactly how to hurt them. There have been times you have gone right for the jugular.
- To those of you with roommates. You have the same opportunity.

Of course, the relationship was damaged, it was hurt, and you accomplished exactly what you want to accomplish. Another type of harmful word is ...

2. Deflection – Words that open a new topic – a topic where you have the advantage

In this case, what happens is that topic A is not a very good topic. You are clearly wrong. You clearly need to ask for forgiveness. But, you don't want to do that, so what you do instead is change the subject so that now you have the advantage.

We see this in arguments all the time. The place where people end the argument is totally different than the place it began.

- We started talking about getting the car fixed and all the sudden we are on to the cleanliness of the home, the ability to buy groceries that everyone likes for free, and the lack of date nights over the past 6 months.
- I am not saying that those topics are not legitimate issues to discuss, but when they are brought up in order to put you in the advantage in a conversation they are words that harm rather than build up.

You are violating the Scriptures about both being a listener and about coming back with harmful words.

3. Intimidation – Words that are vulgar and aggressive

There is nothing encouraging or edifying about a foul mouthed person. I realize that some people have work responsibilities that demand they take charge and lead situations.

- But when that mentality exists at home and in the church house it is no longer godly responsibility and stewardship. It is alienating and ungodly.

Listen carefully. These types of words are sinful and ungodly. According to the text (“no”) these words should not be used. But here is what is even worse; these are the words that you wanted to use whenever you used them. Jesus taught in Matthew 12...

Matthew 12:33-37 "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴ "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. ³⁵ "The good man brings out of *his* good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of *his* evil treasure what is evil. ³⁶ "But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an

accounting for it in the day of judgment. ³⁷ "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

You see friends, being an encouraging person is not so much about whether your parents were encouraging to you,

- it is not so much about whether your boss is encouraging to work for,
- or whether your husband or wife is encouraging.
- This is a matter of your heart.

It is a matter of whether you want to live worthy of the gospel and the kingdom of God or whether you want to construct your own kingdom where you can be king or queen of it.

- Where things that irritate you are met with frontal attacks or things that paint you in a bad light are deflected so that you can hammer the other person.

I am asking you to evaluate your speech right now.

- Then I am asking you to go to the Lord right now and help you repent, confess your sin to the Lord,
- Beg him to change your heart so that the second part of this verse is what characterizes all the things that come out of your mouth.

That is the put off or the “don’t” side of this passage. The other side is that we must use

B. Words for Building Up and Encouraging

After the text emphasizes the important of not using harmful words, it explains that our new life in Jesus is supposed to be characterized by words that build up and encourage.

- That is one of the ways that we live out the gospel
- It is one of the ways that we live worthy of the gospel

I am sure that we could highlight a hundred different ways in which this building or edifying speech could be done, but let’s consider four types of edifying speech.

1. Words of Affirmation

Most, if not all, relationships could use a healthy dose of affirmation.

- Husbands. If you are fortunate enough to have a wife who cares for many of the details in the home (laundry, cleaning, cooking)
 - then when is the last time you have encouraged her?
 - When have you expressed heartfelt appreciation for all that she does for you and your family?
- Wives, if you are fortunate enough to have a hard working husband, to have a man who loves you and cares for you, to have a man who seeks to lead you to Christlikeness, then when is the last time you have encouraged him?
 - When have you expressed heartfelt appreciation for all that he does for you?
- Parents, what about with your children?

- Do you affirm the things that they do right?
- Or do you view your job merely through the lens of what they do wrong?
- Do the areas that they need to improve become their identity in your mind?

- What about at work? Do you affirm the things that people do right and well?
- Or is the “right and well” stuff the expectation and then the “wrong” stuff if what you have to talk about?

- Teens, what about you? Do you encourage your parents in all that they do for you?

Affirmation for things done well is missing in a lot of people’s lives. If you are one of those persons that thinks stuff like:

- If I praise them they will become proud.
- If I praise them they will become lazy.
- If that is you then you have completely missed many opportunities to build up and encourage people.

The Lord is asking you for a new heart attitude. Encouraging or edifying words could also be ...

2. Words of Affection

I realize that it is not appropriate to have words of affection in every relationship. But there are a number of relationships where it is appropriate and it is missing.

You men who have daughters. I liked this post one of my friends put on facebook. PIC “Guns don’t kill, Dads with Good Looking Daughters Do”

- As funny as that line is, there is an alternative.
- It is helping your daughter have the kind of security in her relationship with you that she does not desire it from the boneheaded boys around her.
 - o If she gets her hugs from daddy she won’t need them from the boys who have ungodly motives in their hugs.
 - o If she has been treated well by her daddy she won’t even consider hanging out with a boy who treats her like trash.
 - o If she has security in her parents and in the Lord she will not need to seek it other places.

You husbands. Sometimes you fail to remember how valuable words of affection are to your wife.

- She wants to tell her how much you love her.
- She wants you to tell her that she is pretty.
- She wants you to tell her that she looks cute in some outfit.
- Some guys are like “why would I do that?” or worse “what if I don’t think it.”
- Then it is time to confess, repent, and remember how the Bible talks about your relationship to your wife.

Fathers, it is okay to tell your boys you love them too.

- Even as they get more independent. Even as they spend less time at home.

- Even as they get older and move out of the house, you can still remind them of your love for them.
- You can still remind them that you think they are awesome.

Only God knows what could be accomplished by his people really offering words that build up and edify in all the relationships.

3. *Words of Reconciliation*

Someone once wisely said that no relationship can last long term without the matter of forgiveness. The reason is that we still remain sinful people. But you know some relationships are not reconciled because one person refuses to ask for forgiveness or because another person refuses to grant it.

Building up words are words that reconcile, that bring together what was once broken.

- Parents, when is the last time you had to ask forgiveness for your sinful anger, for your use of words that were harmful?
- When is the last time you asked your spouse for forgiveness?
- Your roommate?
- Your boyfriend or girlfriend?
- Your Lord?

The final category of edifying, encouraging or building up words I will mention are ..

4. *Words of security*

Words of security involve words that demonstrate you can be trusted.

In a marriage, phrases like, “babe, we are in this for the long haul.” “I intend to keep the promises I made to you on our wedding day until the day I die.” Help to establish security.

- Where discussions of divorce erode it.

Some workplaces love to talk about firing people. It is almost like it is part of the culture.

- I think we all realize that we live in economic conditions where downsizing is always possible.
- But when those words hit the street they erode security.
- They encourage your employees to spend thought capital on whether they should look for another job or stick it out. That is thought capital that could have been invested in the business.

As believers our ultimate trust, joy, satisfaction, and security is found in Jesus. But when security is eroded in our relationships, then accomplishments greatly diminish. Imagine if Nehemiah, in the passage we read earlier has simply decided not to post guards.

I guess you could argue that nobody has to have words of affirmation, affection, reconciliation, and security.

- After all, every believer in Jesus has those things in Christ. In a sense you would be correct.

- However, our focus is on the fact that since I have and you all those things in Christ we should be freely giving them to others.

Ephesians 4:29 calls us, by the power of the Holy Spirit and through our union with Christ, to let no harmful word come out of our mouths, but only those words that are for building up.

The text goes on to qualify these building up words...

C. Biblical Encouragement fits the situation and circumstances

I love these words, “according to the need of the moment.” Different moments require different kinds of encouragement. The proverbs explain this same principle on multiple occasions.

Proverbs 15:23 A man has joy in an apt answer, And how delightful is a timely word!

Proverbs 25:11 *Like* apples of gold in settings of silver Is a word spoken in right circumstances.

Don't you just love that imagery? “delightful is a timely word.” “apples of gold in settings of silver.” Just as your words have the power to do harm, so they have the power to do good, if we learn to use them at the right time.

Since I have the privilege of teaching the YC class (a class that meets during the 9:30 hour), I am regularly reminded of what it is like to have a newborn. Many of these couples have an interest in taking the command to be fruitful and multiply very seriously. These regular births remind me of a few lessons I have had to learn the hard way over the years.

- When you get home from work and you see your wife attempting to make dinner while holding an 8 week old who is screaming his or her head off, that is not the right time to ask questions like “How was your day?” [How does it look my day is going, moron?]
 - o “What are we having for dinner?” [that is particularly dangerous question if she happens to be holding a sharp knife in her hand]
 - o “Hey, I was looking at our schedule this month, and I was wondering whether you wanted to have 40 people over to our house next week.” [a response to that might involve all kinds of bad things].
 - o In fact, I learned that the only words that she was interested in hearing at that moment were, “Can I please take the baby and care for his needs?” Nothing else mattered.
 - o If you are in that stage maybe this might be a help to you, PIC “When a woman says “what” it's not because ...
- Or guys, when your wife meets you at the door with tears in her eyes it is not time for a deep theological discussion. It is time for a hug. Then it is time to find out how you can serve her.
- On a more serious note, I have also learned that people ask questions for lots of different reasons.
 - o Sometimes people ask questions because they are curious. Curious people normally want straight up kind of answers.
 - o Sometimes they ask because there is a deep pain in their heart that they do not know what to do with.

- How you answer that question matters a lot. They want an answer, but that answer must be packaged a little differently. Right words at the right time are like apples of gold in settings of silver.

Friends, I want you to live worthy of the gospel. I want you to work to live out every day the fact that you have been saved by grace. In order to accomplish that, you must learn to use words that fit the situation and the circumstances. We also see in this passage ...

D. Biblical Encouragement results in a positive response to the hearers

Did you hear the language, “good for edification,” “give grace to those who hear.”

Proverbs 12:25 ²⁵ Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down, But a good word makes it glad.

The passage commands us not to use the harmful language but rather to use language that is good for building up. Here is how you know you did it right ... when it gives grace to the hearers.

- This relates to giving the hearers something of benefit to them, possibly based on a need that they have.
- There may be a sense here where Paul is saying that our words function as a conduit for God's grace in the lives of those who listen.

The point is that the people we talk to are actually in a better place because we talked to them.

Teachers, coaches, parents, spouses, roommates, bosses. Do not underestimate how the Lord might use your words and your actions to set a person on an entirely different course in life.

Here is a story from my life:

When I was in the 5th grade I had a very mixed academic reputation. On the one hand, I was very good in Math. But on the other hand, my reading was incredibly poor. When I entered the 5th grade I was barely entering the 3d grade reading book.

- What happened next set my academic career in a different direction.
- My teacher handed me the 5th grade reading book.
- I calmly objected that I had not completed the 3d grade book or even started the 4th grade book, so taking the 5th grade book seemed like an innocent mistake.
- Here were her words, “Rob, I think you can do it. This is your book.”
- She did not have to do that. She could have very easily just assumed that I was as dumb as my other teachers thought I was.
- She could have set me aside and worked with the kids that were already good at English and reading. She chose the path of encouragement instead. In the process redirected my academic career.

Friends **James 3:6-10** And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸ But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we

curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

One of the things we can learn about the tongue is that the power of tongue can work either negatively or positively.

Ephesians 4:29 is a mouthful all by itself, but I would like to paint now with a slightly broader brush for a few minutes and see a few times that encouragement is directly taught in Scripture.

II. Circumstances where Biblical Encouragement is Needed

A. When the person is fainthearted

1 Thessalonians 5:14 We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

I think many believers are as good at shooting their wounded as are those without Christ. It is true in people's homes

- Some parents are so hard on their kids that they live in constant fear of the next problem. They have school problems, health problems, identity problems because there is no encouragement.
 - o You take their "fainthearted" position and you use it against them. The end result is that you create a huge divide in your relationship.
- It is true in people's workplaces. Some of you are at the top of the food chain in your office. You have responsibilities to make sure things are done well and they are well oiled.
 - o But listen to me, if your view is that the things they do right are simply what they should do and I am going to tell them about all they did wrong – you will not accomplish all that could be accomplished.
- Even coming to church can be done with different motivations. I can come to church as a consumer or I can come as a participant (where Yes there is something for me to learn, to think about, or to do but there are also people I need to greet, people I need to check on, and people I need to find out if things are better).
 - o You can be a real encourager to the fainthearted around this place ... if you have a heart to be that person.

Those who are fainthearted need words of encouragement. They need to believe that someone is caring for them, interested in them, and willing to help them.

B. When there is a struggle with sin

Hebrews 3:13-14 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end,

I realize that I am still a young man, although in Bible times one of the most amazing miracles happened with a person who was 40 years old (that is where I am) I am learning that people sin for lots of reasons. I used to think that sin = high hand rebellion against God.

- Now I realize that for some sin has deceived them, it is has tricked them into thinking that what is bad is actually good.
- While sin needs to be stopped regardless of the reason, the motivation for sin impacts how I deal with people.

C. When someone is dealing with hard faith questions

1 Thessalonians 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

In 1 Thess 4 and 5 there were many people struggling with happens to believers who already died or thinking that the Day of the Lord has already come. Both sections of text end with the words to encourage one another.

People who are struggling with hard faith questions need to be encouraged with the truth found in Scripture.

Summary

Friends, living worthy of the gospel means that you being in union with Jesus will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, seek to eliminate harmful speech from your mouth.

- By God's amazing grace, your mouth will be filled with words that are good for building up and you will have the wisdom to know when is the right time to use them.
- This will be done so that God is glorified and his people are made stronger and more productive.

In the words of Eph 4:16 **Ephesians 4:16** ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Every relationship needs encouragement. Let's ask the Lord to help us live it out. Pray.