

**ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER**  
**1 THESSALONIANS 5:11**

I love the story told by Larry Olsen in *Outdoor Survival Skills*:

A guy has been lost in the desert for days. He's out of food and water. His lips are parched, his tongue swollen. His legs are bruised and bleeding from crawling, his skin is scorched by the sun, bitten by insects, and pricked by cactus thorns. As he pulls himself over the next sand dune, he sees nothing but more wasteland through his bloodshot, sand-peppered eyes. He sighs, "You know, a few more days of this, and I might get discouraged."

In actuality, we are prone to be discouraged far more quickly than that, as John Piper has noted:

"...one of the pervasive marks of our times is emotional fragility. It hangs in the air we breathe. We are easily hurt. We pout and mope easily. We blame easily. We break easily. Our marriages break easily. Our faith breaks easily. Our happiness breaks easily. And our commitment to the church breaks easily. We are easily disheartened, and it seems we have little capacity for surviving and thriving in the face of criticism and opposition." [*The Roots of Endurance*]

We need help and hope — and we need to offer help and hope to others who are experiencing difficulty and are despondent, discouraged, and maybe even despairing. That ministry of encouragement is foundational to the church, and it is a vital part of Paul's ministry to the Thessalonian church.

As we come to the communion table this morning, my goal is to remind us of the essential nature of relationships in the church body and how the Lord has positioned us to help care for one another. This year we are regularly focusing on the importance of church life and body relationships; it is crucial that we fulfill the roles the Lord has given us to care for one another. Today we look at the ministry of encouragement from a section at the end of 1 Thessalonians:

**BECAUSE OF THE CERTAINTY OF CHRIST'S RETURN, WE CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER SPIRITUALLY.**

In this verse (5:11), Paul makes **four statements** about our spiritual care of others in the church body:

1. Because of Christ's **COMING**... (v. 11a)
2. ...Intentionally **ENCOURAGE** One Another (v. 11b)
3. ...Intentionally **DISCIPLE** One Another (v. 11c)
4. ...Keep on **WORKING** (v. 11d)

## 1. Because of Christ's **COMING...** (v. 11a)

- Paul uses the conjunction **therefore** to draw a conclusion from vv. 1-10; it is similar to what he did in **4:18**, making a conclusion from 4:13-17. A reminder of the Thessalonian circumstance is helpful:
  - ✓ The church in Thessalonica was severely persecuted (**1:6-7**).
  - ✓ Even Paul had been persecuted there (**2:2, 17; 3:4**) so that his ministry in Thessalonica was short (**Acts 17:2, 5ff**).
  - ✓ What's notable is what concerned the Thessalonians. They didn't want to know, "how can we get out of the persecution?" but they did want to know, "what happened to those who died before Christ's return — will they be resurrected? Are they at a disadvantage because they weren't alive when Christ returned to rapture the church out of the world?" (cf. **4:13**). The concern was for others.
  - ✓ Another concern was about the general nature of Christ's return to set up His Kingdom ("the day of the Lord," 5:2) and the position of those who have already died as believers.
- Paul encourages the Thessalonians with the truths about death for the believer and of Christ's rapture:
  - ✓ Death of believers is not final — the body is merely **asleep** (**4:13-15; Mt. 9:24; 27:52**).
  - ✓ Resurrection of believers will be like Christ's resurrection (**4:14**).
  - ✓ No believer is forgotten by Christ, but He will retrieve all the bodies, beginning with the "sleepy" (**4:16**).
  - ✓ Reunion with the Lord is permanent (**4:17**) — we will always be with Immanuel — "God with us."
  - ✓ The truths about the death of Christ and His rapture of the church was a source of **comfort** (**4:18**).
- Paul also encourages the Thessalonians about the truth of the coming Day of the Lord:
  - ✓ Christ's return to set up His Kingdom (and rule and judge all nations and people) will come suddenly (**5:2**) — it will be a day of disastrous destruction for the rebellious (**5:3**).
  - ✓ Christ's rule is not disastrous for the believer (**5:4**) because we are not **of darkness** (**5:5**).
  - ✓ Christ's coming rule should produce watchfulness and anticipation for the believer (**5:6, 8**).
  - ✓ Christ's coming Kingdom is not for pouring out wrath on believers (**5:9**) — that was already done against Christ for us (and He satisfied God's wrath), so that we may **obtain salvation** (**5:9b**).
  - ✓ The return of Christ is a promise of permanent reunion with Him (**5:10**).
- Paul does not set out to tell the believers — "your life is not so bad...toughen up..."
  - ✓ He has affirmed the reality of suffering.
  - ✓ But he has reminded them the suffering and the difficulties are not final. Christ's return is final.

- ✓ We do well to follow a similar pattern when trying to help the hopeless. Don't downplay or minimize the sorrow, pain, or difficulty of their burden ("let me tell you about *my* situation which is *really* bad...). To be alive in this world is to suffer in this world; our sufferings are all different, but we can also be sure that they are all hard.
  - ✓ We will help the suffering not when we minimize their troubles; but we will help them when we maximize Christ's plan and power. We need to teach and remind them of the bigger picture and the bigger scope of what God is doing (e.g., 2 Cor. 4:7-11, 16-18).
  - ✓ "Christ (Messiah) is coming" is the focus of OT hope (Zech. 14:4, 9-11).
  - ✓ "Christ is coming" is the focus of NT hope (Jn. 14-16; Rom. 8:18; Rev. 19:11-16...)
- What will we do with the reality of Christ's return? How will that be a help to the church body?

## 2. ...Intentionally **ENCOURAGE** One Another (v. 11b)

- The word **encourage** has a broad range of meanings: it can mean to "comfort" (console), and it can be used to "exhort" (challenge), or "urge" (call to action). It is a favorite word of Paul (half of the NT's 109x) and a favorite in Thessalonians (10x — e.g., 1 Th. 2:12; 3:2, 7; 4:1, 10). Three observations:
  - ✓ There is some debate about how to translate **encourage** in this verse; it is the same word as in 4:18, where it is translated "comfort" — the Thessalonians are dispirited and need consolation. It seems to me that is probably more of what Paul also means in this verse (which is in the NASB margin).
  - ✓ **Encourage** is an imperative: encouraging others is not optional for believers. It's foundational to what we do with others and for others.
  - ✓ **Encouragement** is mutual (**one another**)— which has a couple of inferences:
    - Everyone, at various times, needs to be encouraged and strengthened. We need to be called to action and we need to be comforted (and given hope) for what God can do. Sometimes you need encouragement and sometimes I need encouragement — but we will both need it, just like the boy who asked his dad to play with him: "Dad, let's play darts. I'll throw and you say, 'Great shot!'" We need someone telling us that all will be well and life is going the way God intends.
    - Everyone is able to give encouragement — Paul says the believers in Thessalonica **know well** the truth (5:2). He is just reminding them. If you are a Christian, you have the Spirit of God and the Word of God, and that's all you need to encourage others. The Spirit and the Word have strengthened us; we can use both to strengthen others. (An easy way to do this is to read a passage of Scripture and pray — do you know what a help it is to hear someone pray for you? To know that they are asking the God of all things to help you? It's hugely helpful!)

- Some implications for encouraging one another:
  - ✓ *Am I looking for others to encourage?* Do I have my eyes and ears open for the suffering? (And just a hint about identifying sufferers: if they are breathing, they are hurting in some way; just ask.)
  - ✓ *Am I aware of what kind of encouragement my brother needs?* It has been noted that there is only about 12 inches of difference between a pat on the back and a kick in the pants, but there is a world of difference between the two. Actually, the word **encourage** can be used of both. I need to be wise as I look at my brother and see what he needs.
    - A friend told me one time that he needed to receive some counseling. Why? “I need someone to kick me in the pants to get me doing what I know I need to do.”
    - Other times, we need to adapt — what begins with comfort might end up in exhortation; or what begins in exhortation may end up in comfort and consolation when someone genuinely tries and still struggles and falls. We need wisdom to know what each one needs (e.g., v. 14).
  - ✓ *Am I preparing myself to encourage others?* Paul says, “you yourselves know...” (v. 2). Paul is reminding them of the truth of what they know from Scripture. Am I training myself with the Word so that it is helping me and so that I am equipped to help others? We have nothing else that we can use to help others; but we don’t need anything else to help others (2:13).
  - ✓ *Am I actively encouraging even if/when I need some help?* I don’t need to be at the pinnacle of my spiritual strength to help others; I am a struggling sinner who helps people by pointing them to the Savior; He is our source of hope and strength. If I wait until I’m perfectly ready to encourage someone else, I won’t help them until I get to Glory.

### 3. ...Intentionally **DISCIPLE** One Another (v. 11c)

- The word **build up** is a construction term and it is used that way in the Gospels. Paul uses it as a metaphor for the role of the church in equipping and training disciples (Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Cor. 3:9-17).
  - ✓ Like **encourage**, **build up** is an imperative — it’s a duty and obligation for the believer. And on this side of Heaven, everyone needs to be built up; everyone needs help to live like Christ
  - ✓ The responsibility is also mutual — **one another**, just as there is a responsibility to encourage.
  - ✓ It is also a present tense, which means this is an ongoing responsibility — whenever we have opportunity, we should be looking to help others grow in their faith to become more like Christ — consider the example of Paul and his friends (cf. 3:9-10).
  - ✓ In the context, he is clearly indicating that we are to use the truth of the coming of Christ and the judgment of Christ to build up one another so that we have confident hope in God’s work.

- Notice at least three more implications:
  - ✓ *This command is for all of us* — “We are not to leave it to an elite of professional comforters or counsellors....encouraging and comforting are ministries which belong to all members of the Body of Christ.” [Stott] This is a reality we will see in a few weeks in Romans 15:14. We have everything we need in order to minister to one another so that we are mutually sanctified.
  - ✓ *The solution for our despair is theological.* The despair the Thessalonians experienced was because they did not act on the truth. So Paul corrects their theology about what life on earth is like now (it’s temporal) and what life will be like in Christ’s Kingdom (it’s eternal).
    - Does theology help us in our struggles? Yes.

“Many Christians are discouraged because they believe the depressing lies of their fallen hearts rather than actively engaging and controlling their minds with the uplifting truths of God and His great redemption.” [Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind*, 112.]

- Most of what we do in counseling, discipling, preaching, and teaching, is helping each other correct our unbiblical thinking. And when our thinking changes, our lives change.
- In this instance, Paul has determined that their despondency that is demonstrated in excessive grief is because they have not thought correctly about Heaven and eternity; when their minds change, they will be able to also live rightly.
- ✓ *Our ministry is often a ministry of reminding.* The Thessalonians already knew what they needed to know to move out of despair — they just needed to be reminded of what they already knew. We might think, “He already knows \_\_\_\_\_, so I don’t know what else to say...” We do well to remind each other, because we have probably forgotten in the moment of temptation.

#### 4. ...Keep on **WORKING** (v. 11d)

- Two other times Paul has commended the Thessalonians for doing the right thing (4:1a, 10a).
- When you are doing the right thing, there might be a temptation to stop (because of weariness or thinking the job is finished).
- The other two times he is explicit; here he is implicit — keep on. Don’t stop. Endure. Persevere.
  - ✓ Isn’t the hard part of ministry sometimes the need to keep on encouraging and helping?
  - ✓ When we keep doing what is right, we may be weary, but we will never be disappointed. It may seem fruitless, but who knows when the word of exhortation will push someone over the edge to significant sanctification or even salvation? I’d hate to stop one day too soon...

“[Troubled people] cannot be dismissed with just a word of hope and a dose of medicine but require a long time in which to tell their griefs and to receive their comfort.” [Spurgeon]

- ✓ This is akin to what Paul says in **1 Cor. 15:58** — it's hard, but it's worthwhile.
- ✓ "The Christian may never relax, thinking he has made sufficient progress." [Morris] That's true for both the disciple and the discipler. Wherever you are helping someone, keep on.

## CONCLUSION:

I was cleaning up around the front doors of the school building we use for church on Sunday....It was a typical windy winter day, so there was a pile of swirling leaves and the usual detritus from school a couple of days ago; lunch wrappings, a sultana box, a drinks container, someone's sports bag in the corner, and random pieces of paper....

As I bent over to pick up a piece of scurrying cling film, a piece of paper caught my eye. It caught my eye because it was obviously torn from a notepad and then folded up. It was lying near the bins. I picked it up, curious. Obviously a note. A note from someone in the school to someone else in the school.

I put the other rubbish in the bin. I had the note left over. I felt a bit voyeuristic. Was this mere titillation, a script version of a Peeping Tom? What would the note say? Who it would it be to? Who would it be from? Who would it be about? I wonder why I even picked it up.

In unfolded the piece of paper, and just felt incredibly sad.

**Here's the note:**



Well it's most of the note. I cropped off the name of the boy scribbled down above the arrow....

There was something mean spirited about it. Something dehumanising. That someone had taken the time to draw a picture of another student pointing a gun at their own head and putting their name above it, with an arrow pointing downwards: That's him folks, that [boy] pointing a gun at his head!

No context of course. Perhaps it was how a person was feeling. Perhaps it was a joke. Perhaps the boy who drew it and the boy for whom it was intended are best buddies.

But it didn't feel like a joke. It felt like a tear across the soul, never mind a piece of paper. What had I been expecting? A love note? A reminder note? A word of encouragement?

I hope that boy with the torn off name didn't get to see it....I guess it was passed on to someone else about him. And all I was left with was the speculation, without in any way of knowing who the people involved were, what they were doing this for, and who this boy might be, or what this boy might have done – or not done – to elicit such a response.

And then I thought worse. Perhaps that boy drew that note of himself. It is entirely possible. We live in that kind of world. Schools are not pain free zones, in fact there is plenty of pain in a school, and it elicits enough pain itself for many students that the effects linger for decades. Just ask any psychologist. The forming years are the years where things stick. Where things burrow themselves deep.

It was a reminder to me, as church was about to start, that people come into our lives in parts. We never get to see the whole. We see a torn off part of someone's day, their week, their lives, and it's easy to think we see the whole picture, or the context. But we don't.

It's a reminder to be careful with our words, our actions, our attitudes and communication about others. It's a reminder that we form our actions and attitudes and communication about others at an early stage. And we can carry those into the later stages of our lives for good or ill.

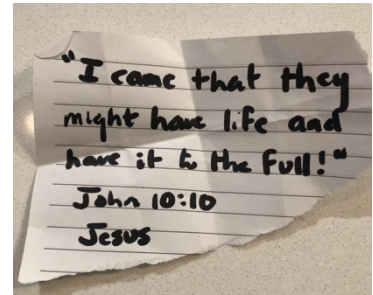
I was preaching at church on Sunday night. Preaching about not grieving as those who have no hope. We see so much grief and so little hope around us, and that little torn note felt like a barb in my skin that pushed me to proclaim the wonder of Jesus, who he is and what he came to do for humans. And what did Jesus come to do?

Here's a little note to remind you. It's a little note that I'm going to leave lying in the school grounds on Sunday night (against my better OCD judgement), ready for Monday morning.

I guess there's little chance that the boy in the note pointing the gun at his head, or the student who drew it, will see it, so it feels like a small win. But a win nonetheless.

Here's the note I'll leave:

It's a small gesture to counter the note with the boy pointing the gun at his head. But a life-affirming gesture. And don't we desperately need those at the moment. [Stephen McAlpine, ["The note I found of the boy pointing the gun at his head."](#)]



- If you are not encouraging someone, find someone to help — today. (It's not hard to find someone that needs encouragement; just find someone that's breathing.)
- If you *are* encouraging someone, keep working. I can't promise it will be easy, but I can promise that at the end of the age, when you stand before Christ, it will be worthwhile.

**BENEDICTION:** 1 Thess. 5:23-24