

Family Matters 9: ENCOURAGEMENT MATTERS
I Thessalonians 5:6-11 (AFBC 7/17/16)

We continue to look at Family Matters that affect all relationships, not just the ones in our homes. Our focus today is on "encouragement." This is so important in Scripture—that you and I are to be encouragers for each other.

The verb for "encourage" is used 109 times in the Bible. In Romans 12:8, encouragement is listed as a gift of the Spirit, so there are some among us who excel as encouragers—they're gifted at it--but it's the responsibility of every follower of Christ to BE... an encourager. With that, let's look at our text:

6 So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 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.

Who reassures you when you suffer a setback in life? Who holds you accountable when you stray from the Lord or His church or when you're not doing what's right? Who points it out when you're just going through the motions and not giving your best?

These persons, whoever they are, are your encouragers. They understand that "encouragement matters!" Thank God for them--even when you don't agree with what they're saying. If Christ's Spirit is guiding them, they are simply obeying the Biblical mandate to be "encouraging."

1. I want to share with you four reasons why encouragement matters so much. First: **ENCOURAGEMENT MATTERS BECAUSE DISCOURAGEMENT ABOUNDS.**

In so many ways, this is a discouraging world. The media keeps holding up before us standards that are impossible for us to attain--examples of beauty, success, adventure, pleasure,

fitness...or thinness—the list is long—unrealistic standards that go beyond what most of us will ever achieve.

This affects every aspect of who we are and everything we do. Is there any area of life, in fact, where someone is not telling us we ought to be more like whatever it is they're trying to sell us.

Somehow those things they claim will fix all our problems never quite pan out. It's discouraging. Again, discouragement is around every corner—it's everywhere we turn!

One symptom of this is the stressed-out lives so many of us live. Everybody's "on edge"—ready to just let you have it!

You've heard the scenario where the husband gets yelled at at work, so he comes home and takes it out on his wife. She in turn fusses at the children, who vent their frustration by pulling the cat's tail. The cat scratches the dog, who then bites the postman. It's a viscous cycle... and it's really... discouraging!

Some of US may "resemble that remark!" Christians aren't exempt from stress and discouragement—but we shouldn't allow these moods to dominate our lives--although sometimes they do.

I wonder if God ever gets discouraged when He sees this in the lives of His children? He's certainly made it clear enough in His word that He wants us to be encouragers—less negative—and a lot more positive in our dealings with one another.

I heard about a city in the Netherlands that had a problem with litter. The sanitation department tried doubling the fines for littering, and even increased the number of policemen patrolling the parts of town where the litter was so bad, but it didn't help.

Then someone suggested a different approach. Instead of punishing those who littered, why not reward the folks who put their garbage in trash cans? So here's what they came up with.

The sanitation department developed a trash can that played a recorded joke whenever someone put trash in the can! Different cans played different jokes, and the recordings were changed every two weeks.

Well... people started going out of their way to put garbage in

trash cans. Before long, the streets were clean and the people were laughing. That's called "positive reinforcement." Negative approaches didn't work, but a more positive method did.

Here's another example: Marian Gordon tells a story about opening her door to go out and get her newspaper, and being surprised to see a little dog at her door with her newspaper in its mouth. Delighted with this unexpected "delivery service," she went to her kitchen and got the puppy a treat.

The following morning, though, she got an even bigger surprise. When she opened the door, she was shocked to see the same little dog sitting at her front door, wagging its tail, surrounded by **eight** newspapers—seven of which... were not hers!

She says it took her all morning to return those papers to their rightful owners. In the process, though, she learned that positive reinforcement really works!

Now, if on that first morning, instead of a treat, she'd taken that newspaper and swiped that little dog--he would never have returned. And it works this way with human relationships, too.

We swat people one time too many, and they don't come back to us emotionally. They may still be there physically, but they'll be somewhere else relationally.

If you've tried everything else, why not try encouragement? It not only works, it's God's will. And it feels so much better, too. There's plenty of discouragement everywhere we turn. As Christians, WE understand that "encouragement matters!"

2. Let's continue: ENCOURAGEMENT MATTERS BECAUSE THERE'S A RACE TO FINISH. Paul referred to life as "a race." Our children learned about this in VBS this year.

As he drew close to the end of his life, Paul said, "I have finished my race." (II Tim. 4:7) Surely this is one of the reasons he told the Thessalonians to "encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." (I Thessalonians 5:11)

We learn a couple of things here: first, encouragement and building one another up is not something that just happens naturally. Paul had to urge his fellow Christians to do it.

Second, encouragement matters so much God felt it necessary to make this part of His word to us. Many times He tells us to be encouragers. Why do we hear so much about this in the Bible?

When encouragement is mentioned in the New Testament, it focuses mainly on two things: remaining faithful to Christ and His church, and having a growing relationship with the Lord. Paul wrote to people who were persecuted for their faith—people who could have easily grown discouraged.

This world still opposes the Gospel. We need encouragement to continue standing firm for Christ in the midst of a culture that often rejects Him and heads in opposite directions from His will.

Many today see Christians as being foolish. They think we're basing our lives on things that never happened, and trying to live by a moral code that's terribly out of date.

Jesus warned that following Him would not be a popular choice. Listen to His words in John 15:18-19—

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you."

So... anyone here like being hated? Do you enjoy being regarded as fools? The Bible says we are to expect this—but do you find such warnings encouraging... or discouraging?

Christians are routinely portrayed in the media as foolish or hypocritical or bigoted—and at times for good reason— but often it's without justification—simply reflecting someone's prejudice.

No one likes to be seen this way. Nobody enjoys having their beliefs ridiculed. It's discouraging. We may even be tempted to wonder if maybe they're right and we're wrong.

That's when we need to come alongside each other and say, "Keep the faith. Don't give in to doubt. Don't let the contempt of the world turn you away from the Truth."

We need to encourage one another to believe God and trust the truth of the Gospel in a world that we find increasingly hostile.

The Christian life is a struggle. Jesus said that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. But He also said that in order to follow Him, we'd have to deny ourselves and take up our crosses daily.

In other words, we have to be willing to give up everything, including--if necessary--our own lives, in order to follow Christ. We have to be willing to suffer... and sacrifice.

Jesus said that choosing to follow Him is not a decision to be taken lightly. We must first count the cost. What it cost us is our lives--everything we are, all that we have.

We face a battle with sin daily. God's grace is sufficient, but it's still a struggle. We need strength every day to follow Christ and resist temptation. We need encouragement from one another to finish the race, and not give up.

Now, let God's word speak to your heart as we listen to these encouraging words from **Hebrews 12:1-3**—

“Therefore . . . let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross. . . . so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Barnabas is one of our New Testament heroes. Some of you know His name means “encourager.” He was often sent to others as a messenger of encouragement. Here's an example:

Acts 14:21-22—“Then they (Paul and Barnabas) returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.”

Do you see how important it is that we encourage one another on this journey of faith? Who do you need to encourage? Who do you need to go to and express your concern because you sense how discouraged they've become in their faith?

Or maybe *you're* discouraged. Here's a word of encouragement found in Hebrews 10:25--**“Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another...”** In the church, in the body of

Christ—in our faithfulness, our giving, and our serving—let’s encourage one another!

3. Now this: ENCOURAGEMENT MATTERS BECAUSE THERE’S A GOAL TO ACHIEVE. What’s our goal as believers?

It’s for our lives to be pleasing in God’s sight—which means we take the opportunities and abilities that God gives us and make the most of them. We’re called to be good stewards of life—doing our best for God’s glory. This is our goal!

Have you seen the old movie, *As Good As It Gets*? Jack Nicholson plays a character who, to put it bluntly, is “as nutty as a fruitcake.” He’s mean, angry, obnoxious, calloused, and, well... crazy--pretty standard stuff for Jack Nicholson.

The movie co-stars Helen Hunt, who plays the ever-patient waitress who rescues Nicholson from his obsessive/compulsive behavior. She’s sweet, compassionate, funny, and strong.

In one scene, the two of them are having dinner in a nice restaurant. He’s been mean and insulting for the entire meal, and she’s had it!

She tells him she’s going to get up from the table and leave... unless he finds a reason to compliment her in *a meaningful way*.

Nicholson sits there for what seems like forever trying to come up with something. Finally, as she’s turning to leave, he calls out, **"You make me want to be a better man."**

She’s obviously moved by this; and she replies, **"That’s maybe the nicest compliment anyone has ever paid me."**

I got to thinking about that. It’s a pretty good description of encouragement—when you or I use our influence to help someone else become a better man or woman, boy or girl. That’s what encouragement is supposed to do.

Again, **I Thessalonians 5:11--“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”**

Help one another become better people—in family and church, on the team, at work and school. What if we as followers of Jesus

Christ consistently made it our goal to help others be their best—just think of all the good that could be accomplished through the power of our influence!

When Handel's great oratorio, *Messiah*, was first performed, a nobleman complimented the composer on the "wonderful entertainment" he had produced for the people.

"My lord," Handel replied, "I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better."

This is the potential of strong Christian relationships--that we make each other better as believers, as spouses and parents and people; that we make each other stronger in Christ Jesus--able to endure the setbacks and discouragements of life, and be our best for God's glory! Let's close with this:

4. ENCOURAGEMENT MATTERS BECAUSE OUR SAVIOR IS SUFFICIENT. God's whole purpose for humankind is relationship --a close fellowship, a joining together of heart, mind, and spirit.

The Bible teaches that the relationship between humanity and God was broken because of sin. God is holy, and our sin separates us from this holy God.

But God, with His abundant love for us, sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to bridge that sin-gap. The Carpenter from Nazareth built the bridge with two pieces of wood and some nails.

How important are we to God? Important enough to die for!

Friends, there's nothing in this world more encouraging for any of us than this great truth!—that **"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..."**

Let the message of our Savior encourage you. And let the power of His presence in you help you to be an ENCOURAGER for others—because, friends, this matters more than we know. As we share our lives together, encouragement matters!