

“Encouraging Words”

Ephesians 6:21-24

Pastor Dan Erickson

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The end of a movie, whether you are watching in a theater or on TV, contains the credits, giving you the names of all the people who made that film happen. Some people stop watching as soon as the credits start to roll. Others watch intently, looking for a name they might recognize. I suspect most folks don't tune out completely but pay little attention to the information the credits contain.

As we read the New Testament, we find that most of the letters written by Paul and the other apostles, end with what we might call the “credits.” These contain personal greetings and mention names we probably don't recognize. It is easy to think these parts of the Bible really are not that important, especially for folks living on the Iron Range in 2022. But remember, the book of Ephesians, for example, contains not just Paul's words to some first century Christians, but these are God's words to all people, at all times and in all places. When God speaks, we better listen.

Folks, today we come to the end of our journey through the book of Ephesians. In the past seven months we have explored one of the most powerful books in the Bible. In the first three chapters the apostle Paul gives a marvelous exposition of the gospel, the great new of God's salvation, experienced by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ alone. He spells out some of the implications of that salvation. Such as breaking down the wall that divided Jews and Gentiles. In chapters 4-6 Paul turns his focus to applying the gospel, focusing on its' impact on a wide variety of relationships and life situations. It's all good stuff.

And then Paul concludes this letter with four verses. They may not seem that significant on the surface, but God's words are always relevant and important for our lives. Let's pause and pray that the Lord would help us see how that is true of this passage today.

I will start my reading our text. **Ephesians 6:21-24 So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very**

**purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts. Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.** Paul's purpose in this passage can be summed up in one word. Encouragement. He has just composed a God inspired letter, full of magnificent truth and very practical applications. But Paul knows that the real flesh and blood people to whom he was writing need more than great truths to ponder and instructions to follow. They need *encouragement*.

First century life was full of trials and troubles. Being a Christian often meant opposition. It was easy to become discouraged. The temptation to just give up was sometimes very real, and Paul didn't want that to happen. His love and concern for the Ephesian Christians, and desire that they would live for the glory of God made him and encourager.

Now, Paul has already provided plenty of encouragement in this letter. In the first two chapters he tells us we as believers have been given every spiritual blessing in Christ. We have been chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, made alive in Christ, and saved by grace through faith. Those truths are at the heart of the gospel, the great news.

That is a marvelous foundation from which great encouragement flows. Yet, Paul, guided by the Holy Spirit, chooses to end his letter with encouraging words. He includes some ordinary, horizontal encouragement and some extraordinary vertical encouragement.

The first, horizontal, refers to the encouragement the Ephesians will receive from Tychicus, the man delivering Paul's letter to them. He has been Paul's secretary, writing the document as Paul dictated. We don't know a lot about this man, though Tychicus is mentioned in five different New Testament passages. He was Paul's friend and coworker. **Ephesians 6:21** calls him “**A beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord.**” He often acted as a messenger, apparently

delivering letters not just to this church, but also to the Colossian Christians and to Titus on the Isle of Crete.

Paul says, **Ephesians 6:22 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts.** Remember, Paul writes this letter when he is imprisoned in Rome for the first time, apparently under some type of house arrest. It is only natural that his friends in Ephesus would be anxious about how he is doing. Tychicus will be able to tell the Ephesian Christians that Paul is physically safe, his health is okay, and he is in a relatively comfortable prison situation. A few years later Paul will be in a Roman dungeon which is much less fun. And Tychicus will report that Paul is not discouraged, emotionally or spiritually. During his imprisonment, Paul's resolve to be a faithful follower and apostle of Jesus has only been strengthened. Tychicus will tell them how Paul takes advantage of opportunities to tell prison guards and anyone else with whom he has contact about the magnificent gospel of Jesus Christ. And he will report the deep affection and concern Paul continues to have for the Ephesian Christians, for every single one of them. The hearts of the Ephesians will indeed be encouraged as Tychicus gives this report.

Yet, I suspect Paul know Tychicus' encouragement will involve more than that. As a faithful minister of the Lord, Tychicus will be looking for opportunities to speak words that will encourage the Ephesians. He will likely be available for conversations with individuals who are struggling and will seek out those who seem to be wandering away from the faith. Tychicus is probably the type of fellow who just makes a room a better place when he walks in. whether it is a spiritual gift, a personality trait, or just something he is very intentional about, I think Tychicus was an encourager.

That, folks, is the ordinary, horizontal encouragement Paul wants to provide for the Ephesians, mediated through his very human but very faithful fellow servant, Tychicus. But there is another source of encouragement Paul seeks to provide, and really it is better than a hundred Tychicus'. It is extraordinary, vertical encouragement, coming from God Himself. In his community, John Stott calls them prayer-wishes.

These words, written in the form of a benediction, reflect Paul's prayers for the Ephesians.

The two key words in these concluding verses, are two words which have been at the center of the entire letter. First is "peace." **Ephesians 6:23 Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.** Through the gospel, believers in Jesus find peace with God and with each other. **Ephesians 2:14a For he (Christ) himself is our peace.** It is through faith in Jesus that we experience that peace with God, and the love of God that overflows in our hearts is what fuels the peace we enjoy with other believers in Jesus. Paul knows that this peace, if he were speaking Hebrew would call it Shalom, provides the sense of wholeness and well-being we all desire. Paul's prayer-wish is that this is what the Ephesians would experience.

The second word, which has been so central to this letter is "grace." **Ephesians 2:8a For by grace you have been saved.** Now Paul writes **Ephesians 6:24 Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.** Grace is God's unmerited, undeserved favor. Or as the little acrostic I learned years ago says, Grace is God's riches at Christ's expense. This makes this verse a little difficult to understand because on the surface it seems to be saying grace is a reward for those who love the Lord Jesus, which is certainly not the case. Various Bible versions each translate this verse a little differently, but I do like how the NLT puts it, **Ephesians 6:24 May God's grace be eternally upon all who love our Lord Jesus Christ.**

It is grace that put the love of and for Jesus in our lives. It is grace that continues to enable this love to continue, and it is grace that will lead us home. And in God's eternal kingdom, we will continue to live and breathe God's grace. Every ounce of joy we experience in our eternal home will ultimately be not because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus has done for us. And Paul's desire is that his friends would find great eternal joy through this amazing grace. As John Stott says, "No two words could summarize the message of the letter to the Ephesians more succinctly than peace and grace."

And that all folks. That is Paul's letter to first century Christians in the city of Ephesus, in what was then called Asia and is now known as Turkey. But these are also God's words for us today, here in this room, or watching the livestream. So, what is God saying to us today?

I don't think it is much of a mystery. It would not be any clearer if you found these words in big bold letter in your Bible. *Be an Encourager*. Provide encouragement through those ordinary, horizontal means to other believers in Jesus. And pray that other believers will enjoy that extraordinary, vertical encouragement only the triune God can provide.

People around you need encouragement. For example, the W.H.O. estimates that about 5% of the world's population will struggle with some form of serious depression each year. Interestingly, that percent is a bit higher in the United States, which indicates wealth and affluence are not cures for depression. Over the last two plus years the cases of depression have skyrocketed. In Australia, for example, which had strict Covid lock downs, it is estimated that 25% of the adult population struggled with serious depression last year. Here on the Iron Range, the isolation and disruption of life that has occurred the past two years has resulted in an increased number of suicides, especially among males under 55.

Now, it is not easy to know how to help someone struggling with depression. Yet just being willing to spend time with that person, listen and speak words of hope can be encouraging. Now, if you know someone dealing with severe depression, urging them to see a physician is a very good thing to do. And if someone seems to be seriously contemplating suicide, a call to 911 is likely your best option. But it is not just people dealing with severe depression who need help. All of us need a regular flow of encouragement our lives. Just like in the first century, life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is full of trials and troubles. Health issues, family conflicts, and financial problems are a regular part of our lives. And as Christians, as people who believe in and follow Jesus Christ, we are facing an increasingly hostile environment. A recent essay, James R. Wood, noted that before 2016 most people in the United States viewed evangelical Christians more positively than negatively. If a couple learned a new neighbor went to an

evangelical church like ours, it is likely they would be pleased by that. After 2016, things changed. The number of people who would be disturbed to learn their neighbors are evangelical Christians now equaled the number who would positively. Today, 2022, things have further eroded, and the author claims most people now view evangelical Christians negatively.

If these statistics are accurate, it is hardly a surprise, since in recent years most of the entertainment media (Hollywood), the mainstream news media, and higher academia have continually portrayed evangelical Christianity in a negative way.

Maybe you are thinking, "Who cares Pastor Dan? We should be focused on pleasing God, not being popular with people around us." That is true, but my point is this increasingly hostile environment does make it more difficult for us to do our job of making disciples and it means more Christians will struggle with doubt and discouragement as they seek to follow Jesus.

Now, I think there are things we as a church and individual Christians can and should be doing to correct misperceptions and change the image folks out there have about us, but that is a topic for another day. Right now, our focus needs to be on encouraging one another and take very seriously what the Lord tells us in **Hebrews 10:25 (Make sure you are) not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.**

"Encouraging one another." How do we do that? Many different ways. A big part is demonstrating our concern for and commitment to one another. That is what happens in a healthy family. And what happens in a healthy church, which is a spiritual family. I hope you know that as you seek to trust and follow the Lord there are other people in this room who have your back and are cheering for you. They want you to flourish in every part of life, but they are especially concerned that you are growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Encouraging people often involves action. Giving a person a ride to Duluth for a medical appointment, babysitting for a young mom who is getting a bit overwhelmed by the demands of

caring for young children, giving a \$100 to someone who has an unexpected car repair bill, or spending a couple of Saturdays helping someone do a remodeling project are all ways to be an encourager. And yet words can provide powerful encouragement as well. Letting people know we appreciate different things they do or how we see God at work in their lives are encouraging words. Taking the time to ask someone that question: *How are you really doing?* and then listening to his/her answer can be very encouraging.

Constructive criticism, if done gently and in love, can be encouraging. One of the best things we can do is remind one another of the promises God has made to us in the Bible. For example, if someone is feeling lonely, quoting or reading verses like **Hebrews 13:5 The Lord himself has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you**, can be helpful. Of if someone is struggling with guilt, encouragement may mean reminding her of **Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**. And a good encourager doesn't just quote Bible verses. Explain what those verses mean and talk about the encouragement you have received from the truth found in particular texts.

Again, I am not sure being an encourager involves a spiritual gift, is something certain people are naturally inclined to do, or if it is just a matter of choosing to be intentional about encouraging. It may be a combination, but I do believe every Christian is called to encourage one another. If you, empowered by the Holy Spirit, strive to do that, I think you will succeed.

Let me just say, I am so grateful for the many encouragers that are part of Chisholm Baptist Church. In the almost 29 years I have served as the Senior Pastor here I have benefitted from many words and deeds of encouragement. I am very grateful for many of you in this room, and the ways which I have been encouraged through you. And if I can give one shout out today, it would be to Pastor Ron, who I see as a model for being an encourager. Over the past 10 years that Ron has been part of this church, the Lord has used him to encourage many, many people. So, if you want to be a better encourager, you might just want to watch Pastor Ron a bit.

Okay, that is the ordinary, horizontal aspect of encouraging others. But don't forget, the

opportunity we have to encourage others in an extraordinary, vertical way by praying for them. Some of you might think this is the easy way to do it, others might think it is harder. But the Lord gives us a wonderful opportunity to encourage other through prayer. That includes praying for very practical needs, asking God to help someone flourish in all aspects of life. This means praying that Bill's back will be healed, that Sue's young children will be better behaved, that Bob will get the promotion he has applied for, that a relationship between Joe and Mary and their son will be repaired.

Yet, more importantly to encourage one another, we are to pray for each other's spiritual welfare, for spiritual growth. Pray that despite, or maybe because of the back pain with which he is struggling, Bill will grow in his faith in and love for Jesus. Pray that even as a busy mom, Sue will find and make time to have a consistent quiet time and grow in her understanding of the Bible. Pray that whether he gets a promotion or not, Bob will honor the Lord at his workplace. And if he gets that promotion, pray he will use the extra money he makes in a way that pleases the Lord. Pray that Joe and Mary's lives will be filled with grace, love, humility, and forgiveness, and that their son will see that, turn to the Lord Jesus, and that this would be the basis for their reconciliation. Pray that peace and grace will fill the lives of people around us.

Friends, no matter when or where you live, as a human being, you can use encouragement. As a recipient of God's grace in Jesus Christ, you can be an encourager. May the Lord help us to receive and give encouragement today.