



*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dear Church Family,

Twice in Hebrews (3:13, 10:25) and twice in 1 Thessalonians (4:18, 5:11) Scripture says to encourage one another. The Greek word here is *parakaleo* (v.). It appears over 100 times in the NT and it is translated with a wide range of English words (exhort, urge, plead, encourage, comfort). The two ends of this spectrum, exhort and comfort, might be viewed as opposites in terms of what is being practiced. What is the essence of a Greek word that can encompass such a broad range of meanings in translation? *Kaleo* is to call or address. *Para* is next to or alongside. It is significant that Jesus uses another noun form of this word *paraklete* when talking about the Holy Spirit in the gospel of John (Jn 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7). ESV and NAS translate this Helper, NIV translates Counselor, KJV Comforter. The emphasis of using this word is that the Holy Spirit will be with you or alongside you. It is an important matter of location. Not up high in heaven but sent to be alongside you and in your life. So when we consider the practice of encouraging one another, *parakaleo*, the crucial aspect of this is coming alongside the person to help. What is needed, what is helpful, will be different according to the person and the situation they are facing. That is why there is a broad range of expressions of this practice, from exhortation to comfort.

And this is why the Holy Spirit is better than Jesus in the flesh as Jesus tells his disciples in John 16:7, “*Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.*” The Holy Spirit as spirit is able to be present with a believer in a more personal manner that is specific to their life and personality than the incarnate Jesus. The Holy Spirit is able to encourage many different people, facing many different situations, with different messages at the same time. And He wants to use us in this ministry. We should consider that we are agents of the Holy Spirit as we encourage one another. And the goal of our encouragement is the ministry of the Spirit described by Jesus “*He will glorify me, he will take what is mine and declare it to you*” (Jn 16:14). We can think of encouraging one another as offering what is needed to a person to help them be more connected to Jesus, abiding in Him according to John 15. And this is an important way that we can be helpers of one another’s joy because Jesus concludes his teaching on branches abiding in the vine with these words, “*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full*” (Jn 15:11).

The broad range of the ways *parakaleo* is translated alerts us that what is needed will be different for different people and situations. With our one another passages, I see three different types of encouragement. Hebrews 10:25 and 3:13 have encouragement that is exhortation. The encouragement of 10:25 is described in the preceding verse, “*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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.*” NAS has spur one another which better captures the idea of exhorting one another to more effort. This is the most common form of *parakaleo* in the NT. Paul is constantly exhorting and urging disciples to do the right thing, to engage their wills in behavior that is worthy of the gospel. He assumes that this will not happen naturally and requires effort and intentionality. The kind of effort and intentionality that athletes devote to competition (1 Cor 9). Behind the need for this kind of encouragement is the understanding that we are tempted to ease and complacency in our lives and will not put in the needed effort on our own. We should be aware of the temptation to a life of complacency in which we end up living more like the world than like citizens of the Kingdom of God to come. And we need one another to encourage us to live lives that are different, which is a key reason why we need to gather together.

Hebrews 3:13 is also exhortation or urging, but it is about avoiding sin, particularly the deceitfulness of sin. “*Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the*

*deceitfulness of sin.*” This exhortation of Hebrews 3:13 believes in the power of sin and the real, daily, danger of being tempted into sin. To think that we will be successful in resisting the temptation to sin on our own is a big mistake. We need others to exhort us, even when we are well aware of the temptation and are determined in our own heart and mind to resist it. This is why we need fellowship where we can confess sin and temptation and receive encouragement in the form of accountability and exhortation. We also need each other in areas of our lives where we are so deceived that we do not recognize sin we are involved in or do not recognize the effect it is having on our life with God. We can be falling away from the living God without even being aware of it and we need someone to help us see that.

I noted that this exhorting aspect of encouragement is not always well received today. You might hear it dismissed as legalistic or promoting performance based spirituality. And that certainly can be happening. But we need to be careful that we do not throw the baby out with the bath. The dangers of complacency and being enticed by sin are real and we are certainly not less susceptible to them in comparison to the early church. We must not lose this aspect of encouragement in our lives because it is uncomfortable or challenging. I left you with this as a topic of discussion in homegroup, how can we practice exhortation without the negative side effects?

So we do need this type of encouragement, but we also need other types of encouragement. And there are situations where this type of exhorting encouragement is not what is needed and can even be detrimental. The context for 1 Thes. 5:11, “*Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing*” also addresses the potential for complacency with the metaphor of falling asleep. Paul says in verse 6, “*So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and sober.*” But he then goes on in v. 9-10 *For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.*” What Paul is essentially saying is, “as believers in Christ, you should live as people of the light or day and not sleep, but even if you are asleep, your salvation is secure.” And that is what they are to encourage one another with. If you are concerned about complacency and laziness, wouldn’t this be the wrong message to be sending? But what if you are dealing with a different type of person or situation? Not someone who is tempted to take it easy, but someone who is driven to achieve, and in their Christian life is dealing with anxiety because they are more often than not feeling like they are not measuring up to the high standards of their Holy Father in Heaven. That person needs a different type of encouragement than exhortation. That person needs to feel better about themselves or their situation. An exhortation toward more effort would likely only make them more discouraged.

In 1 Thes. 4:18, (“*Therefore encourage one another with these words*”), words of comfort are being addressed. Paul is answering the question about what happens to fellow believers who have died. He says the dead in Christ will rise first so they will all be together with Christ when he returns. These are encouraging or comforting words to deal with the loss of loved ones. Times of suffering and trial require comfort, not exhortation and not positive encouraging words about someone or their situation. And offering comfort in times of trial may be the most necessary and the most challenging for us as encouragers. One writer on the challenge, “A friend of mine put it simply: “I want to help when a friend is hurting, but I freeze up because I don’t know how. So I withdraw, and then I feel guilty because I know I have let them down.” We do not have to say the right thing or fix the situation. The most important comfort may be our presence and a listening ear. Withdrawal is not helpful because their trial might include struggling against the belief that God has withdrawn from them.

So encouragement comes in different forms. What we need the most to be an encouraging community is to embrace the call to be encouragers. Larry Crabb makes this simple observation, “If meeting together with brothers and sisters in Christ is to become a time of encouragement, the first requirement is that we make it our goal to encourage.” We need to ask the Holy Spirit to put us in that mindset. And this is a challenge. Lois Rabey writes, “Being an encourager is costly. It takes thought, time, and energy. Most of us live such frantic, self-centered lives that we simply don’t notice other people’s need for encouragement. We’re so busy keeping up with our own lives that we don’t take the time to stop and think how we might touch someone else.” Thankfully, we can ask the Holy Spirit to enable us to be encouragers and grow both as individuals and as a community in this important ministry to the glory of God.

Pastorally Yours,

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