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**AKL0510**

The Powerful Gift of

ENCOURAGEMENT

*One day a teacher asked her students to list the names of the other students in the room on a sheet of paper, leaving a space between each name. Then she told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down. It took the remainder of the class period to finish their assignment, and as the students left the room, each one handed in the papers. That Saturday, the teacher wrote down the name of each student on a separate piece of paper, and listed what everyone else had said about that individual.*

*On Monday she gave each student his or her list. Before long, the entire class was smiling. “Really?” she heard whispered. “I never knew that I meant anything to anyone!” and, “I didn’t know others liked me so much,” were most of the comments. No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. She never knew if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn’t matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another. That group of students moved on.*

*Several years later, one of the students was killed in Vietnam and his teacher attended the funeral of that special student. She had never seen a serviceman in a military coffin before. He looked so handsome, so mature. The church was packed with his friends. One by one those who loved him took a last walk by the coffin. The teacher was the last one to bless the coffin. As she stood there, one of the soldiers who acted as pallbearer came up to her. “Were you Mark’s math teacher?” he asked. She nodded “Yes.” Then he said “Mark talked about you a lot.”*

*After the funeral, most of Mark’s former classmates went together to a luncheon. Mark’s mother and father were there, obviously waiting to speak with his teacher.*

*“We want to show you something,” his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. “They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognise it.” Opening the wallet, he carefully removed a worn piece of notebook paper that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times. The teacher knew without looking that the paper was the one on which she had listed all the good things each of Mark’s classmates had said about him. “Thank you so much for doing that,” Mark’s mother said. “As you can see, Mark treasured it.” Others of Mark’s former classmates started to gather around. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, “I still have my list. It’s in the top drawer of my desk at home.”*

*Chuck’s wife said, “Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album.” “I have mine too,” Marilyn said. “It’s in my diary.” Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. “I carry this with me at all times,” Vicki said and without batting an eyelash, she continued: “I think we all saved our list.” That’s when the teacher finally sat down and cried. She cried for Mark and for all his friends who would never see him again.*

*We forget that life will end one day. And no one knows when that one day will be.*

What impresses me about this story is that it demonstrates how valuable praise and appreciation is. Everyone enjoys being appreciated or encouraged. In fact, we hunger for it.

Today we’re going to talk about the powerful gift of encouragement.

American philosopher William James said “The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.”

It gives you a lift when someone admires something you are wearing, or compliments you on what you are doing. A well placed compliment can even change the course of someone’s life. It is likely you remember compliments you received years ago.

Mark Twain quipped “I can live for 2 months on a good compliment.”

On the other hand, you can probably also remember criticisms you received years ago. Times when someone yelled at you and tore strips off you in front of others. Some people go through life bearing hurts like this that can hold them back from a happy life.

Everyone likes a compliment, but nobody likes to be criticised. Criticism stings, and often leaves a scar. What a pity it is then that so many people are criticised so often, and sometimes encouragement is a very scarce commodity! It is easy to laugh at other people’s ideas, to pick holes in their arguments and put people down. Our innate human selfishness often leads us to downplay the achievements of others lest they show us in a bad light.

The famous U.S. steel magnate, Charles Schwab, a very influential and successful businessman, said “The way to develop the best that is in a man is by appreciation and encouragement. There is nothing else that so kills the ambition of a man as criticism from his superiors. I believe in giving a man incentive to work, so I am anxious to praise but loathe to find fault. If I like anything, I am hearty in my approbation and lavish in my praise.”

I think we would all like a boss like that! Thankfully, we do have a God like that – a God who respects and encourages us. And it is important for us to be like that ourselves, to be quick to give appreciation and encouragement to others.

Here is an example of the encouragement God gives His people.

Joshua 1:6,9 6“Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them. 9Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

The word “courage” comes from the Latin word for heart (cor, from which we get words like coronary and corpuscle). So to encourage means to put heart into someone.

The famous physician George Adams said “Encouragement is oxygen to the soul.” An old Japanese proverb says, “One kind word can warm up 3 winter months.”

There are Bible Proverbs about it too…

Proverbs 12:25 “Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.”

Proverbs 16:24 “Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.”

Notice Proverbs 3:27 “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act.” That “good” doing could be giving a word of praise or encouragement at the right time!

You possess a power that can change other people’s lives for the better, and also at the same time cause them to like you! That is the power of encouragement! It’s a power we should use more often – a gift we can give people.

Paul encouraged the Church at Thessalonica:

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3, 7 “We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 7And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.”

2 Thess. 1:4 “Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.”

In turn they encouraged Paul:

1 Thess. 3:7-9 “Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”

God gives us encouragement:

1 Thess. 2:16-17 “May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who loved us and by His grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, 17encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

We are commanded, or exhorted, to encourage others!

1 Thess. 5:11 “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.”

Paul worked on encouraging the brethren:

Colossians 2:1-2 “I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. 2My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ”. \

He sent Tychicus to do this: Col. 4:8 “I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about ourcircumstances and that he may encourage your hearts.”

Notice his warning not to discourage our children: Col. 3:21 “Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.”

It is often in our family life that encouragement can be sadly lacking. I think it is caused by that principle “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Because we are always with our husband or wife or children, we often don’t think of thanking them and complimenting them on many of the things they do.

How long is it since you rang your husband or wife at lunchtime to say “Just thinking of you sweetheart and realised again how wonderful you are.” She/he might have a heart attack, but take the risk! If she makes meals night after night, it might be a while since you praised her for how tasty and delicious the meals are.

And it’s easy to criticise our children, instead of praising them for jobs well done.

It’s great to say a word of appreciation and praise to fellow workers, shopkeepers, anyone we come in contact with.

But it has to be sincere! Don’t say it if you don’t mean it. Then it becomes flattery, and people see right through that.

People seldom think of encouragement as a gift because it seems so ordinary. But it isn’t. Encouragement is actually quite rare (because it is seldom given) and it is so valuable (because it is so meaningful to the recipient). Encouragement makes the perfect gift, and here’s why:

1. ***It’s free.*** Encouraging someone requires absolutely no cash outlay. This doesn’t mean there is no cost. It may cost you time, creativity, and thoughtfulness. But all of that is what makes encouragement so appreciated. It requires something from you, not just something from your wallet.

2. ***It requires no shopping***. You do not have to make a trip to the mall for this gift. Many times this gift can be delivered from the home or office. Writing a note of support or making an encouraging phone call may be all that’s necessary.

3. ***It doesn’t have to be gift wrapped***. Attractive wrapping adds to the appeal of a gift, but none is needed with encouragement. It is beautiful all by itself.

4. ***It can be custom-designed.*** You don’t have to worry about sizes. But you must still give some thought to making your gift of encouragement a perfect fit. You have to think about some details – what are the best words of comfort, motivation or support the person needs to hear.

5. ***It doesn’t require batteries.*** So many gifts require batteries as an energy source. Not so with encouragement. It creates an energy all by itself. If you don’t think so, just watch the increase in activity when you motivate someone with a kind and supportive comment.

6. ***It will last a lifetime.*** Think about it. What other gift could you give to a child that will have value for years later? Encouragement can do just that. A little word can make a big difference, and the results can be life changing.

Oh there is one more thing about encouragement. No one ever gets too much of it. So don’t be stingy – give it often!

A little snippet from a magazine:

*“I know a young man who, when a teenager, caused the death of another young person through carelessness. He could not handle the burden of guilt. When he returned to school, he was sure that the other students were staring at him, talking about him, condemning him. Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore. He decided that at the end of classes that day, he would go home and take his life. He felt that he didn’t deserve to live. At lunch in the school cafeteria, a girl passed him a note written on the back of a candy bar wrapper, “Hang in there, Dan,” it said, “we all know what you’re going through and we’re rooting for you.” That note saved Dan’s life. It told him that someone thought he was worth caring about.”*

Another example from the Bible is that of Barnabas.

Acts 4:36-37 “Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), 37sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.”

He was called Barnabas because encouragement was a noticeable trait he displayed.

Acts 11:22-24 22“News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.”

An example of this:

Acts 14:21-22 21“They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.”

As I mentioned before, God is a God of Encouragement. Here is an example:

Luke 3:22 “and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Very encouraging! Not many of us say that to our children, but we should be able to.

Luke 19:17 ‘Well done, my good servant!’ his master replied. ‘Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.’ We look forward to God saying this to us at the end of our lives.

John 14:26 “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

Another word for Counsellor or Comforter is Encourager. This is the Greek word “parakletos”, which means “one who comes alongside to help, guide, comfort, encourage.”

The word com-fort is from the Latin “fortis” = courage. Encourager is probably a better translation of

“parakletos” than Comforter.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 3“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

“Comfort” here can be translated “Encourage.” God is an expert at encouragement – it is one of His specialties.

2 Cor. 1:5 “For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” Comfort and encouragement should abound through Jesus Christ.

Here are a few basic principles on how to give encouragement:

1. It must be sincere, not flattery.

2. It helps to be specific. Phrases like “good job” or “nice going” are fine, but they have limited impact because they are so vague. “I like what you’re wearing” isn’t as good as “That’s a really nice dress – it suits you.”

3. Do it publicly where possible – praising your children, for example, in front of others, is even more effective, because everyone hears how good they are. But not flattery – that will be found out!

4. Don’t delay, say it when you think it, or the opportunity might be lost for good.

5. Sometimes just being there, being with someone, is encouraging, especially in a crisis.

A Bible example of this:

2 Cor. 7:5-6 5“For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. 6But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.”

6. Don’t just assume someone will know they have done a good job, or think someone else will have praised them. Maybe they don’t have a clue.

7. You can encourage in writing as well as verbally. Sending thank you notes or encouraging notes – people can keep them and look at them often, so the encouragement is multiplied. People sent letters of praise from bosses keep them for years!

8. Look out for good things in others that you can comment on.

9. You can encourage someone by listening intently to them; that shows respect for their opinion and appreciation of them. You can encourage by smiling, and expressing your interest.

10. Because it is so easy to criticise, especially our children, and so hard to appreciate them, it’s easy to disapprove of what they do wrong and overlook what they do right. I read of someone who put 10 buttons or coins in his pocket at the beginning of the day, and transferred one to the other pocket each time he praised a child. The goal is to move them all to the other pocket by the end of the day – but sometimes they go back to the pocket they started in!

*A guy stands in a bar sipping a drink. He begins hearing a voice saying nice things about him. He thinks he’s losing it.*

*He says to the bartender, “There’s something wrong with me. I keep hearing this voice saying nice things about me.”*

*The bartender says, “There’s nothing wrong with you. It’s our peanuts.”*

*The guy exclaims “Your peanuts? I don’t understand.”*

*The bartender says, “Yes, our peanuts. You see, at our bar, peanuts are complimentary!”*

Even peanuts can do it – why can’t we?

It is the secret to training animals – dolphin trainers at oceanariums give positive reinforcement in the form of buckets of fish to reward good behaviour. Praise and encouragement of children when they do well should have the same effect!

Virginia Wade said this: *“Has the word ever gotten back to you that so-and-so thinks you’re intelligent? The next time you’re around whoever said it, you certainly don’t want to do anything to dispel the myth. You behave this way even if the myth is negative. Suppose people think you have a bad temper: you may well exaggerate it because “they think I’m bad-tempered already, so what’s the difference?” You live up to what you think other people’s image of you is.”*

A couple of closing Scriptures:

Hebrews 3:13 “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”

Hebrews 10:24-25 “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

We encourage one another just by being here – and it is great to see that happening in the Church. I think we already do practice this in many ways, so I’d like to praise and compliment you on that. But I hope going through this subject today has helped reinforce in our minds once again, how vitally important encouragement is. This is a very powerful gift we can give to others!

**Let’s become experts in giving out encouragement!**