**Encourage one another**

Text 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 51b, 515, 324, 502, 525

**Series:** The ‘one anothers’ of Scripture (#4)

**Theme:** Paul, Silvanus and Timothy encourage the church of the Thessalonians by answering two questions about the second coming of Christ and also calling them to encourage one another with the certainty of the Lord’s return in glory.

**Proposition:** Continue to encourage one another and build one another up– Christ is coming again, and you have nothing to fear!

**Introduction**

With the ongoing restrictions, uncertainties, inconveniences and threats of this pandemic, some might wonder ‘is God really in control?’ Or perhaps there is someone you know in the congregation who is divorced and they struggle with deep sadness and regret. Life is hard and some days this person wonders whether they have the strength to carry on. Or maybe, there are parents in the church who are finding raising their children really tough with all the pressures of online media and this mum and dad are becoming very discouraged. Perhaps there’s a brother or sister in Christ who is studying at college or university, and they are finding the workload really difficult. They are seriously wondering if this is really what the Lord wants them to do. Or maybe there’s a church member who is struggling with addiction and they are depressed and too embarrassed and fearful to reach out to anyone for help.

I have made up all these examples – any resemblance to anyone you know is unintentional. The reason that I have given these examples is to you is so that you can think about the question ‘what do all these struggling saints need’? Here’s a clue – it is in the title of this sermon! In all these examples are people like you and me who need encouragement. They, we, are like the saints in Thessalonica to whom was written the words of our text: *“encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing*” (1 Thess 5:11). The Greek word translated ‘encourage’ in our text literally means to ‘call alongside’ – to rally to support someone. It was used in the ancient world of a soldier who would come alongside another warrior to help them by telling them to ‘fight on and finish the battle’.

The idea of this word ‘encourage’ is to enable another person to face a difficult situation with confidence and courage. Our English word ‘encourage’ means literally ‘with heart’. Biblical encouragement provides comfort and kind support to one struggling saint from the heart of a fellow brother or sister in Christ. Encouraging one another is another way in which we can love one another (John 3:34).

In our lives, at one time or another we are likely to experience times of discouragement. Perhaps some of you are feeling discouraged, disheartened, dismayed, despondent or distressed today. Sometimes we may ask why God has chosen to put us, our family and/or our church into the difficult circumstances in which we find ourselves. We may be asking questions like those of the psalmists: “*My God my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Ps 22:1). “*Why do you hide your face from me?*” (Ps 88:14). “*How long must your servant endure?*’ (Ps 119:84). Our need for encouragement indicates that we are prone to despair of God’s grace as we go through the trials, traumas and tribulations which are an unavoidable part of this life.

As we look at 1st Thessalonians 4:13-5:11, we are going to see encouragement modelled by church leaders and hear the call to encourage one another. Here is our prayerful petition to our Lord “*Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law*” (Ps 119:18).

1. **Encouragement by church leaders**

Good leaders lead and teach by example (1 Peter 5:3). In this letter we see the Apostle Paul, Silvanus and Timothy modelling a ministry of encouragement to the church at Thessalonica. These three men had come to this Greek city during Paul’s second missionary journey. The congregation there were mostly gentiles. The local Jewish community stirred up trouble against the Christians there resulting in a riot in which a Jewish convert called Jason was dragged before the authorities (Acts 17:5-10). This was a church suffering under persecution. They were also a church of new believers who were confused and anxious about the future. In particular there were two concerns which troubled them greatly: a) the fate of Christians who had already died by the time the Lord returned (4:13-18), and b) the danger for those who were alive when Christ came, but who were taken by surprise and so missed out on the event (5:1-11).

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy responded to their fear, confusion and anxiety with words of encouragement which are written in verses 15-17 of chapter 4: *“For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep” (v15).* Christians who have died are not somehow ‘ahead of the queue’ when Christ returns. All will enter the New Heavens and New Earth together (1 Cor 15:52).  *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first (v16).* All those who are saved will be raised to new life in new bodies at the same time. Those who are not in Christ will then be resurrected before the final judgement (Acts 24:15). “*Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (v17).*

These are words of encouragement to those who are grieving the death of fellow believers and who are anxious about their future together. The firm assurance is given that all God’s children, no matter at what stage in history they lived and died, will be publicly gathered together to be with Christ forever. That would have been a great encouragement to the persecuted, confused and grieving Thessalonian believers. It is a great encouragement to us today as we face an unbelieving world that is hostile to Christ and a future which is uncertain and troubling.

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy also encourage the church in Thessalonica by reminding them that, whilst the return of Christ will come suddenly, it will not be a surprise to them. Neither is this event something to fear, because, as they remind the church, “*God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (5:9). It is a great encouragement to be re-told that we, brothers and sisters, have no reason to fear the future in Christ.

Are you someone today who has not yet come to believe in Christ? Someone who has not obtained salvation through Him? Let me encourage you to come to Jesus who delivers His people from the wrath to come (1 Thess 1:10). Brothers and sisters, whilst we do not know the details of events which are yet to occur and we do not know the day or the hour when Christ will return (Matt 24:36), we do know that we will not face the righteous wrath of God, because Christ has already endured this for us.

Can you see how this letter to the Thessalonians is a letter of encouragement from these three church leaders, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy? This should not surprise us because encouragement was a central part of their ministry to the church when they were physically with the believers there. Listen to how they describe their approach to gospel work in chapter 2 verses 11 and 12: “*Like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you*”. The Greek word translated ‘exhorted’ here is the word ‘encourage’ in our text. The Greek word translated ‘encourage’ means to ‘console, comfort, encourage, cheer up’. So, we could accurately translate these words ‘*Like a father with his children, we encouraged each one of you and encouraged you*’.

Good fathers pour out encouragement on their children. Good church leaders pour out encouragement on those in their care. Notice the manner in which this encouragement ‘in spades’ was conveyed – gently (2:7) and affectionately (2:8). The word ‘gently’ can also be translated ‘kind’. Biblical encouragement is gentle, kind, affectionate, and loving. It is not ‘distant’, cold or detached because it is an expression of a deep love for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. This love is motivated by Christ’s love for them. Listen to how Paul, Silvanus and Timothy describe their heartfelt ministry of encouragement: “*We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us*” (1 Thess 2:8).

It is also important to see that Paul the encourager was in turn greatly encouraged and overjoyed by Timothy’s earlier good report of the faith and love of the Thessalonians. Here is what he writes in chapter 3 verse 9: “*For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God*”.

Church leaders, pastors, elders, deacons are called to be actively engaged in a ministry of encouragement by coming alongside those in their care and sharing not only the gospel, but their own selves. Speaking the truth of God’s word with kindness, gentleness, affection and love is a great encouragement to suffering struggling believers. Leaders can gently encourage church members to be incorporated into the body life, work and ministries of the church.

Being an encouraging leader is Christ-like. Jesus was an encourager. One who repeatedly came alongside His disciples in kindness, gentleness and love. He taught them patiently, choosing His words carefully. Jesus took the time to understand each of His disciples – like a good shepherd did with his sheep in those days. Remember that He said to His disciples, gathered in an upper room before he left to go to the cross,: “*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you* ***another*** *Helper to be with you forever*” (John 14:16) The Greek word used to describe the Holy Spirit as our helper (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) comes from the same root as the word translated in our text ‘encourage’. Each one of us, brothers and sisters, is called to be a helper to one another as we encourage one another which brings us to our second point:

1. **Encouragement for one another**

There are many different ways to encourage other people; sometimes just a smile is enough, on other occasions lending a helping hand with an overwhelming task can be hugely encouraging as you work alongside someone else. However, our words can often be amongst the most encouraging, or alternatively discouraging, aspect of our lives together: ‘*a harsh word stirs up anger*’ (Prov 15:1) – harsh words are not encouraging; ‘*rash words are like sword thrusts*’ (Prov 12:8) – careless words can greatly discourage the hearer.

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy carefully chose the words they wrote to the church at Thessalonica about the second coming of Christ. First and foremost it was the truth of God’s word which was the source of their spiritual encouragement. Scripture was also to be the foundation of the Thessalonian believers for their encouragement of one another, as they express at the end of chapter 4 “*Therefore encourage one another with these words*” (v18). The better we know the contents of the Bible, the better equipped we are to encourage others with the Word of God.

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, because of the hope of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ; “*Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing*” (1 Thess 5:11). The verb tenses of both commands – ‘to encourage one another’ and ‘to build one another up’ are in the present continuous. This conveys the idea that these are to be habitual actions. Encouragement of one another is not just to be an occasional action, but it is to be a key characteristic of the lives of all Christians. For sure, some may excel in this more than others. For example a man called Joseph, a native of Cyprus was an example of a great encourager in Scripture. Do you know what he was also called by the apostles? ‘Barnabas’, which means ‘son of encouragement’ (Acts 4:36). Yet it is important for you and me to know, accept and act upon the truth that being an encourager for one another is not a special spiritual gift. It is the calling of every believer.

Notice also the command to ‘*build one another up*’ in our text. The underlying Greek word here is used of physically building a structure – like the wise man who built his house on a rock (Matt 7:24) or of a town built like Nazareth had been (Luke 4:29). Here it is used metaphorically to mean spiritually strengthening a fellow believer with your carefully chosen encouraging words. Paul uses the same word when he writes this to the Ephesians: “*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for* ***building up****, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear*” (Eph 4:29).

Our words to each other may be conveyed by text, email, phone call, card, letter or in person when we visit a brother or sister in need. Such communication of encouraging words can make all the difference to someone who is struggling with despair. Perhaps you have experienced the gracious balm of a word of encouragement when you were anxious, fearful, or suffering? The key question to ask ourselves as we think **before** we speak (ref. James 1:19) is ‘are my words good for building up?’, ‘are they encouraging?’, ‘am I speaking the truth in love?’

There are circumstances when there is a need to admonish a brother or sister in the Lord. In the next section of this letter, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy write: “*We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you*” (1 Thess 5:12) and “*We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle*” (1 Thess 5:14). Not all our words to one another can necessarily be immediately encouraging, but the aim of all admonition is ultimately to build others up in their faith. Proverbs 27:6 wisely states that ‘*faithful are the wounds of a friend*’.

Close friendship and fellowship in the Lord are built up from a diet of much mutual encouragement with small doses of admonition if, and when, required. ‘*Speaking the truth in love*’ (Eph 4:15) does not mean clobbering someone with Scripture and then walking away. To speak the truth in love requires patience and kind perseverance. Here are some reasons why people like you and me may not be active in ministry of encouragement for one another:

* We may not want to tempt someone to fall into pride by speaking well of their service to the Lord and encouraging them to ‘*press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*’ (Phil 3:14) – so we say nothing except perhaps for the occasional criticism.
* We may think something like ‘*I have too much on my plate already without thinking about other people’s troubles*’ and forget the mutual burden bearing that we are all called to (Gal 6:2).
* We may not be aware of the needs of others in this congregation because we have not made the effort to get to know those who are outside our circle of family members and friends.
* We may not care enough about others to desire to encourage them and build them up in the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, as the body of believers in the church, we are all called to minister to one another. We are all called to love one another, to encourage one another. Is mutual encouragement a mark of the true church? I think that there is a very strong Biblical case for saying that it is. In fact, part of the reason that we meet together regularly on the Lord’s Day is so that we can actively engage in the ministry of encouragement. This is what the writer to the Hebrews reveals when he writes: **“***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*” (Heb 10:24-25).

Are you encouraging others in this church? In what ways are you fulfilling your ministry of encouragement rendered with the love, tender heartedness and compassion of Christ? Are you willing to look beyond your own circle of family and friends to consider all those with whom the Lord has put you into fellowship in this local church? Think about those who are isolated and lonely. Are you active in coming along side others in this church for the purpose of loving them by encouraging them?

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy knew that there was already an active ministry of encouragement in the church of the Thessalonians, for they write: “*Therefore encourage one another and build one another up,* ***just as you are doing***”. I know that there are encouragers in this church because I have been encouraged by them!

So in conclusion brothers and sisters, in light of the Lord’s certain return, being children of light, not destined for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ: “*Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing*”.

AMEN.