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**OPEN THE CONVERSATION**

* Share a song lyric that encourages you to trust God more.
* Hold up one of your hands. Using a word for each finger, share a five-word description of something you are thankful for today about God’s character.
* Think back over this past semester and summer. What are some people, conversations or experiences that have strengthened your faith?

**INTRODUCTION**

We experience encouragement in almost every area of life with people. Parents encourage kids every day to think in a new way, see the big picture, and be responsible. Kids encourage parents to play more. Friends encourage each other on the athletic field, in the classroom, in playing music, and in fashion decisions. Encouragement is the main ingredient of school/team spirit. The loyalty and love we feel produces a desire to help one another give it our all!

We are made by God to need encouragement from others. Just like a piece of charcoal knocked away from the rest grows cold, we do too without the warmth provided by continual reminders of biblical truth, corporate worship and talking about the journey of faith with family members and friends. God offers us direct encouragement in a thousand ways every day as we attend to Him. We need each other’s words, too, to remember we aren’t journeying alone. We all need the encouragement of people ahead of us in the Christian faith journey, behind us, and walking alongside. We are all discipling one another in something…let’s make sure we are discipling each other toward Christ.

**The church doesn’t just exist to tell others about Jesus. It also exists to strengthen the faith of its members! In Acts we see Paul and his companions’ efforts to encourage and exhort (strongly encourage) both the experienced and new believers they encountered.**

***READ Acts 18:18-23; Acts 14:21-23; Acts 16:4-5***

1. **What kinds of things do you see Paul doing in these passages? How do you see these same kinds of things happening today in the church?**
2. **When you imagine Paul and his friends in all the settings pictured in these verses, you see him teaching the Scripture, speaking in public places, traveling, spending time with close friends and meeting new people—lots of daily life. Why do we need encouragement about Jesus and faith through spoken words in all of these settings?**
3. **What vital things are we missing out on if the only words we ever hear or speak about Jesus and faith are in a group on Sunday?**
4. **Where do you currently feel in need for renewed strength in your faith? How can you rely on Christ to use other believers in this process? How can our group seek to strengthen one another regularly and not only in moments of crisis and desperation?**
5. **Paul and Timothy delivered truth of the gospel (we are saved by grace alone through faith alone), and the ways God wanted His followers to live. The idea of idolatry may look different today, but the heart behind this recommendation still applies: Are we participating in things that our culture says is okay, but the Bible and Holy Spirit do not? Encouragement and truth-telling helps us navigate questions like these together. What kinds of idolatry to you see today that is accepted in our culture but not by God?**

**WRAP UP**

Talking about faith things can be as natural as talking about your favorite foods or music. How can you talk about faith in three new ways this week? Here are some examples:

* Share a Bible verse you read with someone.
* Tell someone about your favorite hymn or worship song and why you love it.
* Share with someone a big aspect of God that you have trouble wrapping your mind around.

Start with your family members. Maybe you can be the first person in your family to say something about a faith journey. Be brave! Words that honor Jesus are never wasted no matter how people respond. If you are having trouble thinking of things to share, let that remind you to spend more time this week with the Lord reading your Bible, praying, or asking Him to guide your thoughts and show you His heart as you go about your day. Ask Him any questions you have about how to start using more words about Him in your daily life.

*Ask for any prayer requests, and pray for one another.*

**EXTENDED CUT**

After leaving Corinth, Paul stopped in Ephesus, where Priscilla and Aquila stayed when Paul carried on. Ephesus, the capital and center of commerce for the province, was a bustling city of between 200,000 and 250,000 people. Home to a massive temple and bustling cult of Artemis, the city was heavily steeped in Paganism. As was Paul’s custom, Luke recorded that he debated with the Jews in the synagogue. Apparently, they were open to Paul’s message of the gospel because they asked him to stay longer (v. 20). But Paul continued his journey, promising to return if God willed it. (Paul did return in Acts 19:1.)

After leaving Ephesus in Acts 18:21, Paul sailed from Ephesus to Caesarea, then headed on to Jerusalem where he “greeted the church” then continued to Antioch Session 9 5 (v. 22). Luke’s language of “up to” and “down to” in this verse was literal, as Jerusalem sits in the hills. In verse 23, which marks the beginning of Paul’s third missionary journey, we get to a key objective of Paul’s ministry. After spending some time in Antioch, he left, traveling through place after place in the region, ***“strengthening all the disciples”*** (v. 23). When Luke said “disciples” here, he wasn’t referring to the twelve men chosen by Jesus in the Gospels, but to all followers of Jesus, including! Strengthening the faith of the disciples was a hallmark of Paul’s ministry. He strengthened the disciples in several ways, both in person (traveling, sharing the gospel, and discipling the believers he encountered) and through his letters.

After preaching in Derbe and making disciples there, Paul retraced his steps and headed back to the towns he had already visited. Luke recorded that believers were present in all these cities. Based on the treatment of Paul and Barnabas in those places, we can assume the believers there also faced opposition. What did they do on this visit? ***They strengthened the believers.*** Paul and Barnabas encouraged them to “continue in the faith” (v. 22). They encouraged them to stick with it. This encouragement was probably needed and welcome to the people who faced constant opposition. It would be tempting to compromise and make their lives easier and safer, but the gift of Jesus is worth any persecution we face.

**Is our need for encouragement today similar to the need of the early believers?**

Our lives look very different than the reality these first-century Christians were living, but we still get weary and tired, sometimes thinking it would be easier to quit following God’s call. Our role as brothers and sisters in Christ is to stand in the gap when we see that happening to others in our church and community. The Christian life is hard, and we should encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Luke recorded that they shared this truth with them: “It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (v. 22).

The enemy loves to make us feel like we are alone, isolated in our struggle, or like something is wrong with us specifically. But Paul and Barnabas knew the truth: struggles and trials are a normal and necessary part of this life. Paul had just been stoned and was presumed dead (14:19). Paul and Barnabas had been persecuted and driven out of towns. They knew a thing or two about hardships, so their stories were surely an encouragement to these believers. When we openly share our struggles and the victories God has brought in our lives, we can strengthen the believers around us too. Following this strengthening, the believers in the new church appointed leaders in their churches who would continue the work of discipleship and evangelism that Paul and Barnabas began.

Encouragement and truth-telling was, and still is, vital to moving the gospel forward! Each of us has a huge part to play in the Body of Christ. Let’s resist the temptation to think of important roles in the Body of Christ as only “leadership” or public roles. God leads us all to encourage one another every step of the way as we walk out our faith together this side of heaven. Like Paul, let’s strive to keep the things of God constantly on our minds and in our words.