

LETTERS FROM DAD

The Encouragement Principle

Text: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Introduction to the Scripture

I'd like to talk on this Father's Day to the men listening in. There will be obvious relevance to women as well, but my express purpose today is to speak with all of us men who play a strategic role as fathers, grandfathers, mentors or supervisors of others. If you're a young guy, pay close attention because this vision we're going to talk about sets a picture of your calling too. If you're a young woman, listen in because we're going to paint a portrait of the kind of man you'll want to look for in a marriage partner or friend.

The lens through which we'll look at this subject is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians who lived at Thessalonica in the Roman province of Macedonia – now part of Greece. Paul was never a father in the *physical* sense, but he served as such a fabulous *spiritual* father to so many people that his insights remain incredibly helpful. Let's reflect on them together as we read from 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, verses 13-17...

The Need for Encouragement

Whether it is in a church, a home, a workplace, or somewhere else, one of the primary ways God grows Great Families is through the principle and power of encouragement. When St. Paul looked upon the church he had fathered at Thessalonica long ago, his family members there needed courage and hope to live amidst challenging times. And so Paul sent them, in a sense, a Letter From Dad, summing up his desire from them in these memorable words: **“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”**

Kids of every age today need courage and hope too. I think it is safe to say that there are pressures and demands being brought to bear upon children and adults that would be unimaginable in previous eras. I think that if we had God's glasses and could fully see the anxieties, fears, and hurts that live inside the people in our homes and hallways because of these stresses, we would want to get out of ourselves more than we do and offer them encouragement too.

But this isn't easy, is it? I'm reminded of the famous prayer of one father: “Dear Lord: I want to thank you for being close to me this day. By your grace, I haven't been impatient, lost my temper, been grumpy, judgmental, or frustrated with anyone. But I will be getting out of bed in a minute, and then I think I will really need *more* of your HELP. Amen.”

Can you resonate with those words? Have you ever tried to parent or mentor others simply on the strength of how naturally lovable they always are or how naturally loving we always are? I think of the story of the child psychologist who spent many hours constructing a new driveway at his home. Just after he smoothed the surface of the freshly poured concrete, his small children chased a ball across the driveway, leaving deep footprints. The man yelled after them with a torrent of angry words. His shocked wife said, "You're a psychologist who's supposed to love children." The fuming man shouted, "I love kids in the abstract, not in the concrete!"

Is It In You?

It is hard to be a source of encouragement, strength, and hope, isn't it? We don't always have it in us. Others don't always inspire it in us. That is why the FIRST job of we who want to help grow great family members is to make sure that we are personally soaking up the love and encouragement of God. Listen again to what Paul says in verse 13: "**We ought always to thank God for you... loved by the Lord.**" In verse 16 Paul underlines once more, "**Our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father... loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope.**"

What Paul says in this letter is that God looks at you and me today with a love that would profoundly encourage and strengthen us, which would give us the hope to face whatever's in front of us, if we could somehow take all of it in. He loves you not because you are good... Not because you have achieved... Not because you love him... But simply because you are *His*. I picture God elbowing the angels and saying: "You see that one there, that one there, that's my kid. I gifted him. I have such plans for her. I'm never giving up on her, never letting go of him. I'd die on a cross for them. They're going to spend eternity with me." But don't take my word for it. Read the Bible. It's filled with love *Letters From Dad*.

Taking God's encouragement into our heart is the spiritual equivalent of hitting the gas station before you make the road trip. It's the spiritual message behind the Gatorade ad that asks "*Have you got it in you?*" Frankly, the road of life is too long and journey too hot for any of us to be great fathers or disciples of any kind, unless we are without drinking deeply and regularly of the love of God our Father. The most loving man in history understood this well. Mark 1:35 says: "**Very early in the morning... Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.**" In his book, *Like Christ*, Andrew Murray explains this pattern: "[Even Jesus] could not maintain the heavenly life in his soul without continually... communing with his Father. With the heavenly life in [us] it is the same: [We have] the same need of... time enough for intercourse with the Fountain of Life, the Father in Heaven."

So where do you find the fountain? I am far from a *great* father or husband, but I'd be worse if it weren't for the Men's Breakfast Fellowship I attend here at the church on Thursdays. For years now, I've also been going to a coffee shop near my house at 6:30 each Friday morning to meet with a small group of guys committed to drinking from God together. On other days, I often use a simple devotional guide like the one we're giving out this morning. I have to do this, because I do not love enough on my own. The love of my own earthly dad or mom, as great as it is, isn't enough to keep my inner tank

topped off. The people who count on me can't always behave so lovably themselves that I'll treat them the way they need to be treated. And so I've got to go someplace, open myself in some way, to make sure I've got God's love in me. What's your secret?

Encourage By Celebrating

When the love and encouragement of God is filling you up, it is like spiritual Powerade. As Paul says, it enables you to **“encourage [the] hearts and strengthen [in] every good deed and word”** the lives of others too. The ministry of encouragement takes a variety of forms. One of the best ways to practice it is by celebrating your kids. It took my own dad many, many years to discover that, maybe because his own dad never learned it. If I brought home five A's and B, he'd want to talk about what happened with the B. Somehow, Dad had gotten the message that you could strengthen your kids best by critiquing them.

There's a place for setting a high bar, as I'll say in a moment, but it ought to always be accompanied by reminding our kids what a great pole they've been given to vault over that bar. The Apostle Paul says in Philippians 4:8, **“Brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.”** When Jesus met a man named Simon he was a guy made of shifting sand, but Jesus saw the grain of granite that was in there someplace and he started calling Simon “Peter” – literally, “Rocky.” He said **“on this Rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.”** And He did and they haven't.

After decades of research the Gallup Organization has demonstrated conclusively that you can improve the performance of a would-be leader far more easily by celebrating his or her strengths and building on those, than by critiquing weaknesses. Why? Because naming what is right and admirable gives a person the inner strength and hope needed to face what isn't. Dads, what can we celebrate in our kids today? What if we all went home this afternoon and wrote out a Letter From Dad to our kids or others we mentor, telling them what we celebrate in them? My own father has started doing that sort of thing. Wow. Getting one of those letters, is like drinking Powerade for the soul.

Encourage By Challenging

There are times, of course, when the ministry of encouragement doesn't make a person feel great in the short-term, but helps develop the strength that allows them to become great in the longer term. Sometimes, we encourage a kid best not by coddling but by challenging him or her. Actor Will Smith, star of TV's *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and many movies tells of a time when his father required him and his brother to repair a 16-by-14-foot wall in front of his business. “We had to dig a six-foot-long trench and rebuild the structure. It took six months. Years later Dad explained why he'd given us that task. ‘When a kid's growing up,’ he said, ‘he needs to see something that looks impossible to do, and then go out and do it. There are always going to be walls in life.’ My father helped us get over one wall, so we'd never be scared to take the first step” needed to get over even higher ones.

In James 1:2-4, the brother of Jesus and son of Joseph once said that God our Father wants us to be “**mature and complete and not lacking in anything,**” so he challenges us sometimes. Dads, mentors how can we encourage our loved ones in this way too? How might God your Father be challenging you personally right now, not to break you, but to build your strength?

Encourage By Clearing

Sometimes we encourage people best by celebrating their strengths, sometimes by challenging them to build strength, and finally, sometimes we exercise the ministry of encouragement by clearing away obstacles, because – though we might wish it were otherwise, they don't have the strength.

Mark Moring recounts a *Sports Illustrated* story perhaps some of you read about an unusual member of the Northwest High football team in McDermott, Ohio. Jake Porter was born with fragile X syndrome, a chromosomal condition that left him unable to read or write his name and dealing with a variety of other issues we associate with mental retardation. But Jake Porter loved football. He attended every practice. He bounced up and down with joy at the sight of other players. And, in his senior year, Dave Frantz, the Northwest coach, decided to honor this heart. Before a game against Waverly High in the Fall of 2002, coach Frantz called Derek Dewitt, the head coach at Waverly. The two agreed to allow Jake to run one play at the end of the game. Jake would get the ball, take a knee, the game would end.

With five seconds left in the chosen game, Waverly was leading Northwest 42-0. Coach Frantz called a timeout. Jake was called out to the huddle, and the two coaches met at midfield. Rick Reilly of *Sports Illustrated* picks up the story here: “Fans could see there was a disagreement. Dewitt was shaking his head and waving his arms. After a ref stepped in, play resumed and Jake got the ball. He started to genuflect, as he'd practiced all week. Teammates stopped him and told him to run, but Jake started going in the wrong direction. The backfield judge rerouted him toward the line of scrimmage.” As a determined Jake Porter rushed toward an apparent mauling at the huge Waverly line, “*suddenly*, the Waverly defense parted like peasants for the king.” Suddenly, Jake was not one boy alone. He was surrounded by 21 teammates, all urging him to go for the goal. In the stands mothers cried and fathers roared. Players on both sidelines held their helmets to the sky and whooped.”

Apparently when the coaches met before the big play, Frantz had reminded Dewitt of the plan, that Jake would simply take a knee. But [coach] Dewitt wasn't satisfied. He said, “No, I want [your boy] to score.” Frantz objected, but Dewitt insisted. Dewitt called his defense over and said, “They're going to give the ball to number 45. [I want you to] open up a hole and let him score!” And so Jake had the run of his life. With arms churning, and face grinning, Jake Porter scored “the touchdown heard round the world,” and claimed his varsity letter.

Once upon a time, God our Father looked upon his children and realized that they simply lacked the strength to reach the goal on their own. And so he called out a play,

and Jesus opened a hole in the wall of sin and death, so that you and I could go stumbling through and cross the goal-line grinning. Helping our kids find that hole and make that run is the greatest thing we will ever do. Picturing for them the heart of a Father who is willing to clear lesser obstacles so they gain some hope is also a piece of that witness. Where is that needed right now?

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word,” so that by the love with which we have been loved, we may more fully and powerfully love one another. Amen.