

More than a few years ago, I arrived in Medford as a young, single teacher; now I'm an older, and hopefully, wiser, married teacher who God has blessed with four grown children, four energetic grandchildren, and another grandson due in April. These days when my students ask me how old I am, I tell them that I started teaching last century; but then, a student corrected me one day and said, "Mr. L, It wasn't last century, it was last millennium!" My response, "Okay, I guess you can't argue with that."

When Pastor Brain asked me to give today's sermon, I was truly humbled by this opportunity to share my thoughts and God's word with you. In last week's Body Lifeline newsletter, he shared that we at FBC always need to prioritize: 1) the gospel and 2) our unity as a church. I hope to reinforce Pastor's statement through four truths that I believe help explain who we are as a church. Inside your bulletins there is an insert that you may use to help follow along with today's message.

**The first truth is that at FBC you will find people who are friendly saints...**

Hebrews 13:1-2 Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Now, I don't know if anyone at FBC has examples of entertaining angels unawares (or, without knowing it), but the commands in these verses to show love and hospitality are ones that the people of our church have tried to practice for over the past 70 years. We also read in:

1 Thessalonians 5:11 Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Notice the two commands. We are to first encourage one another. What word do we see in the word 'encourage'? Courage. You may not think of yourself as heroic, but when you encourage someone, you are kind of like a hero to them in that you do have the ability to help them face their fears. When we encourage, we help put courage into others, which is an awesome thought! Then, in the second verse, we are to be working to build one another up in whatever way they need it. So, when we are told to love, show hospitality, encourage, and build one another up, how do we actually practice doing these things? First, we can do this by our words.

Ephesians 4:29 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.

Do you want to encourage someone by your words? Do as the verse says by building them up! Maybe you have heard about the Oreo cookie philosophy. This is a simple formula of using our words to first, compliment, then, correct, and finally, compliment again. Or, you could easily say encourage, instruct, encourage. Over the years, I have tried to use this as a teacher and coach to help encourage my students and athletes. An example would be to say to one of my art students, "I really like the way that you are staying on task with your project! Did you think about maybe using darker lines to help make that shape stand out? Keep up the good efforts because I believe that you are going to have an awesome art project when you are finished!" Or to an athlete, "Your shooting form is looking better! Now just remember to flip your wrist on the follow-through! I really appreciate how hard you are working to help the team!" Try to apply this formula to build up and encourage people in your life. It is a simple thing to do, but it works.

We also can encourage others by our deeds.

Galatians 6:9-10 And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

The key phrases in these verses deal with 'doing good', which can take on the form of many positive actions towards others. An example of doing good by a friendly saint of FBC, was directed my way the same year that I began teaching. Dave Schroeder also arrived in Medford as the head football coach. I had the honor of working with him as an assistant coach during his one and only season in Medford before he moved on to the college ranks. Dave was about 6'3", 250 lbs, a former football player himself, but though his physical presence was large, his Godly character surpassed it. As much as Coach Schroeder was committed to football, his spiritual priorities were revealed in the way he and his family took me in like family, having me over virtually every Sunday for dinner and to watch football.

It was during those times together they would eventually talk to me about my faith and ask about the denomination that I was involved with at that time. Dave and his wife, Diane, were never judgmental or critical about the church I was attending, but just asked sincere questions and listened. Eventually, coach asked me a question that cut to the heart of where I was at as it pertained to where I was going to church. "Are you being fed?" I'm eternally grateful that coach asked me that question that led to my attending this church because through FBC, I, like so many others over the years, have been encouraged and fed.

The friendly saints of FBC are people that I have personally witnessed practicing such a faith of love, hospitality, encouragement, and the building up of others. When I see church members that represent some of the earliest beginnings of FBC, my heart is warmed with many memories of how they and their family members exemplified the life of Christ in their words and deeds. Some of those members have passed on, but others are still with us and continue their friendly and faithful journey, and we are very indebted to these people for their faithfulness. We will now see that the remaining three points reveal how these friendly saints of FBC have been the recipients of much encouragement and help from God.

**The second truth is that at fbc you will find people who are forgiven sinners.**

When you see me preaching before you this morning, don't I kind of remind you of the apostle Paul? I believe that Paul and I have much in common when we read in:

1 Timothy 1:15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

I don't compare with Paul as a giant of the faith, but as the foremost sinner of all. For the Christian, this is where it all begins. Some people search for the 'perfect' church. Well, it doesn't exist! We begin the journey together at FBC realizing that we are not perfect people; in fact, scripture tells us that it is just the opposite. Yet, despite all our mess-ups and sins, myself and every other Christian at FBC, know that we 'fit in' because we all realize this truth:

Romans 3:23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The people I first met at FBC, and those who attended since, had a sincere grasp of this truth that they knew that we are all sinners, and they would express that in their individual testimonies. But, we are encouraged because we know and believe that the bible tells us that our position of all being sinners doesn't stop there.

**This leads to the third truth: at fbc you have people who trust in a faithful savior.**

At times any one of us may feel like the worse of all sinners'...but we can be eternally grateful for what god has done for us.

Romans 5:8 But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with god through our lord Jesus Christ. (on the same slide.)

Look at this again in romans 5:8: but god shows his love for us (and listen to this amazing truth): in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Every person can walk into this building and be encouraged, and that is because of the good news which is found in god's word, the bible.

Some people have called religion a 'crutch' for weak people. As already noted, we do recognize that we are sinners, not just 'weak' in our sins, but fallen/sinful creatures who were lost in our sins to an eternity of separation from our Creator. But, be encouraged, for we are being held up, but it's not by a 'crutch', but by a cross: the cross of Jesus Christ! Every other religion throughout world history has been practiced around the beliefs that mankind is trying to work their way up to god through their good works. They believe that by their own efforts they can climb their way to heaven, but the bible tells us.

Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

The truths of Christianity is that god has come down to man. To rescue him - you and me and anyone who puts their faith and trust in the truth that Jesus Christ came to earth as the God-man, incarnate, God in the flesh who lived a sinless life, became the perfect sacrificial lamb by dying on a cross for the sins of the world, was buried, rose from the grave to life, appeared in his resurrected body for a period of forty days to people who talked and interacted with him, some of who then witnessed his ascension into heaven! And now, he is seated at the right hand of the father, sovereign, and still in-control of all that is happening here on earth, and angels proclaimed that he will one day return at his second coming! This is the crux (central core root foundational truth) that we here at First Baptist Church have believed, and will always continue to embrace as our only hope.

When we contemplate all of these truths of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for us, it brings great peace to the heart of the Christian. Think again about what was written in romans 5:1. Considering the challenging times that we live in today. Can you think of a more wonderful encouragement from God than to have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who himself is the Prince of Peace?

**This brings us to the fourth truth. At FBC, you will find people who are fruitful servants.**

Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which god prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We have seen how the people of fbc has walked in the good works. But this is all just a part of our ultimate mission. And what is that ultimate mission? We find it in John 1:41-42 He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "we have found the messiah" (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. The ultimate mission is that we bring others to Jesus Christ. And at FBC, we have had a church that has brought people to Jesus. But, the people of FBC have not only been fruitful servants in doing this, but they have been fruitful in another way.

Luke 8:38-39 The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, "return to your home, and declare how much god has done for you." And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him.

I love this parable: the man Jesus healed was faithful in his obedience to Christ, because he went and he told others about Jesus.

Just like you people who attend FBC today, I remember that the patriarchs of our church loved seeing new people coming to church and to Christ! Over the years, people have commented to me how excited they were that so-and-so, or this-or-that family was starting to attend our church. People have also shared their testimonies with me of how a specific person invited them to our church, and as a result, life for them changed when they became Christians!

Think about the faithful people who invited that person sitting next to you, several rows in front, or several rows behind you. The results are that people have come to make fbc their home, enjoying the sweet fellowship and encourage that you people of fbc have to offer. I'm grateful for you fruitful servants of fbc who have also been obedient in sharing your faith by bringing others to Jesus, and you have gone out and shared Jesus beyond these walls. Where does this strength come from in order to be 'fruitful'?

As forgiven sinners after we look to our faithful savior to be forgiven and freed from our sins, then we continue to look to our God, each moment of each day, to be given help from the person of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

John 15:4-5 "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is who bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Does it say apart from me you can do 'some things'? Or a 'few things'? No, it says no thing!

Regarding the Holy Spirit we read:

John 14:26: "But the helper, the holy spirit, whom the father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

1 John 4:4: Little children, you are from god and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (on the same slide)

What are several practical ways you can 'tap in' to that strength? You can schedule regular times to be alone with God in prayer and to read and study the bible and come to church to fellowship and to hear solid preaching. When you faithfully continue to use your gifts from God to help and serve others.

As we close, let me ask you this; are there times in your life when you may wonder if what you do really makes any difference? Well, let me encourage you with this final thought. Just like in an athletic contest, there is always a final score that produces a winner, we as Christians read in the bible that there is a final score in life now and for eternity as it pertains to our obedience and faithfulness to Christ. What is that final score? We find the answer in

1 Corinthians 15:57-58 But thanks be to god, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the lord, knowing that in the lord your labor is not in vain.

Verse 57 tells us that the final score is our victory in the lord Jesus Christ. The final score is revealed in God's word when he tells us that we have a guaranteed victory, and that is because as Christians we come out victorious in both our position in Christ and our practice through Christ. And this is all because thanks be to God, He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember that verse 58 also tells us 'in the Lord your labor is not in vain.' So, people of FBC, you can know and believe that your journey here in this life is worth it all, and it will be worth it all.

And that is this morning's message.