

“How We Help Each Other Grow”

1 Thessalonians 5:9-11



Rev. Patricia Campbell-Schmitt
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Good morning everyone! I am going to start us right out looking at a scripture verse from the book of Romans. Let's read it together. "For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." This verse lifts up one of the great purposes of our lives, to become more and more like Jesus Christ. But to do that we need to grow spiritually. Even more, we need to help each other grow spiritually. We can't become more Christ-like on our own. We need other people to help us and that is what we are going to look at today.

Let's read together this next verse from 1 Thessalonians: "Therefore encourage each other and build each other up..." The goal of 40 Days of Community is to learn how to love. And one of the ways we do that is by encouraging each other and building each other up.

This morning I am going to share four ways we can help each other grow. The first way may be one of the most powerful choices you and I can make each week, the decision to help other people grow by affirming their worth. Now here is a little secret, everybody is looking for affirmation and people will do almost anything to get it. If you don't believe that watch some of the reality shows, and see what people will do to get on TV. When you and I affirm other people we are doing something incredible.

We are showing love, and we are ministering to people like Jesus did. We are representing God to them. Yes, God is an incredibly affirming, loving parent, and when we affirm others we are showing the world a little bit more of what God is like. But here's the question: How? How do we do this? How do we make the choice to affirm other people in everyday life?

I've listed four ways you can do that on the sermon outline. First, you do it with ACCEPTANCE. As Christians we are to accept each other in the same way Christ has accepted us. Instead of choosing to snub people or belittle them or demean them we accept them. We live in a sort of put-down world. When we feel bad, we try to drag other people down to our level. But that really doesn't work. Instead of putting other people down, one of the greatest ways to feel better about who you are is to lift other people up. It will give you a thrill like nothing else. And it will make an incredible impact on the life of the other person. The truth of the matter is that God lifts us up, God affirms us so who am I to put down somebody else?

Now for those of you who are in small groups try this exercise. This week take a little time and energy and think about one thing you can affirm about everyone in your group. Maybe there is a person you are having trouble accepting. Particularly include that person in this exercise. Find some way in the next several weeks to say to each person, "You know, you are really good at that." You don't know the difference that will make in a person's life.

The second way to affirm another is with ATTENTION, not just acceptance, but attention. This takes more time. But here's the general principle. Whatever you pay attention to is going to grow. If I pay attention to my garden, it's going to grow. If I pay attention to my kids, they're going to grow. If I pay attention to my marriage it's going to grow and get better. The greatest gift of love we can give to another is focused attention and that's what people want more than anything else. They want to know that their thoughts matter, that their lives matter, that they are valuable. God pays attention to us. The Bible reminds us that God even knows the number of hairs on our head. This week I want to encourage you all to look for opportunities to show attention to the people in your life, to pay focused attention to them. That is the greatest gift of love you can give them. It will affirm their worth and help them to grow.

The third way you can affirm another is with AFFECTION. We have all read about the failure to thrive syndrome in infants, how if they are not stroked and held and touched as they grow,

they won't develop. Babies have to be touched. Now most people know that, but what most people don't know is that adults need touch too. UCLA did a study a while back that discovered that to be a healthy, fulfilled, satisfied adult you need 8 - 10 meaningful touches a day...hand shakes, hugs, pats on the back. Each of us need some touch in our lives, whether we are married or not, in order to grow and to be all that God wants us to be. And yet, I've talked to a lot of people who say, "You know, the only physical affection I get all week is at church, when someone hugs me."

So everybody please stand up right now if you are able. Come on, stand up. Okay. Everybody stretch. Go ahead, stretch. Touch your toes. Touch your neighbor's toes. Okay. I want you to turn around and hug a total stranger. Go ahead. Turn around and hug a total stranger. All right, sit down. Okay, sit down. Now some of you may be thinking, "I'm never coming back to this church again."

But if we love others in God's family, we need to show it and make a habit of hugging, of giving a firm grip, or a pat on the back, whatever it takes to affirm them. It is not enough just to say it. People need to be touched and they need hugs.

So we affirm others with acceptance, with attention, with affection, and finally we affirm others with appreciation. Now appreciation means to raise in value. Every time you appreciate somebody, you raise their value to you and to others. When you appreciate your wife or husband or child or friend you raise their value. Everything you appreciate increases in value. Today, when this service is over, before you leave this building, find three people to appreciate. If you have kids in our youth groups or in the children's Lighthouse go and find and thank one of the youth group leaders or church school teachers. Thank the ushers, the greeters, thank the musicians and choir members. We affirm others by showing appreciation.

The second way we can help each other grow is by praying for each other's growth. The apostle Paul gives us this example in Colossians when he tells us about Epaphras. He says, "Epaphras always prays for you that you will grow to be spiritually mature." Epaphras did what I sometimes find it difficult to do. He set aside real time to pray for people. He made it a priority. And I love the fact that he prayed for people's spiritual growth. We usually pray for people's needs, for their health needs, or their financial needs, and we should certainly pray for those things. But we don't spend nearly enough time praying for people's spiritual needs, those things that will help us become more and more like Christ. I think one of the problems is that we don't know what

to pray about. How do you pray for somebody's spiritual growth. Well fortunately, the Bible is filled with ideas about how to pray for somebody to grow spiritually.

In fact, that is what I am going to ask you to do right now. On your sermon outline and up on the screen will be five verses, which are really prayers for people's spiritual growth. And what I am going to have you do as we look at these verses is to ask God to bring someone to your mind and heart as you listen to that prayer verse. Hold that person in prayer as you receive their name, and say "Yes, God, they could use that. Help them in that way." Let's take the first verses from Ephesians 3. Who could you pray this verse for? "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge..." Who do you know that needs God's love in their life right now. Bring their name to mind and say, "God show them your love. Let them know today how much you really love them." I have a feeling that these prayers we're praying right now are going to have a lot more impact than anything I say today. It's the power of prayer to make a difference in people's lives.

Who do you know that you need to pray the next verse for from Hebrew 13. "I pray...that you will do God's will...that which is pleasing in his sight." Parents wouldn't you like to pray this for your kids...that they will do God's will and those things that pleasing in God's sight? Well, pray that for them right now, or for some friend, or somebody at work. Or how about this next verse? Let's read it together. "I pray that the God of hope will fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Who wouldn't like some hope in their lives? Who doesn't need more joy, more peace in their lives? And say, "God, I know somebody who needs some hope. Help them to trust in you during this difficult time.

Or what about this next verse from Ephesians that says, "I pray God...would give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation." Who do you know that's facing a decision? Ask God to give that person wisdom right now. Pray on their behalf, for their growth. Look at this next verse from Ephesians. Who do you know who's feeling pretty overwhelmed by life? Who do you know that maybe doesn't feel like they're going to make it or feels like they're having to do everything on their own energy, their own power? Pray this verse for them, "I pray that God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit." Bring their name to mind and say, "God help them to know they're not alone today and that you will give them strength and power."

Now we have just prayed individually for a lot of people and there is power in that. But I also want to encourage you to pray in your groups, because there is even more power in that. Pray for each other's spiritual growth.

Now the third way to help each other grow is by ADMITTING our own MISTAKES. By admitting our own mistakes we build community, intimacy, and relationships faster than any other way. Ephesians 4:25 says this, "Tell each other the truth because we all belong to each other." Tell the truth about yourself, your fears, your doubts, your hang-ups. Now why in the world would anyone do that? Why would anybody risk honesty? Because it's worth the risk. I believe that there are four benefits of being honest about our mistakes, about our feelings, our faults, our fatigue, our failures, our fears...four benefits that occur when you are honest with one other person or a group.

Here they are: Number one, emotional healing. Emotional healing comes from being honest with other people about what is going on in your life. James 5:16 says, "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you will be healed." Somehow God has wired us so that emotional healing comes from telling somebody else about our struggle. You want healing, you want to let go of that pain, you want to get it behind you, you need to tell it to somebody else. Now you don't need to tell everybody, in fact, I don't recommend that. But you do need to tell somebody, a small group of trusted individuals or a prayer partner.

The second thing you get when you do this is a fresh start. One of the most helpful things we can do for others is to help people forgive themselves. We can help each other let it go. In our small groups we don't rub it in, we rub it out. We need to remind each other that God loves to give a second chance, and a third, and a fiftieth, and a 300th. And God never gives up on us, never. Now the third thing we get with honesty, with admitting our mistakes is God's power to change. How does this work? Well, it begins with humility, with honestly facing ourselves and admitting that we need help in becoming the person God made us to be. Unfortunately pride often blocks God's desire to help us. Pride prevents us from reaching out for help. Honesty breaks through that cycle and gives us a chance to receive God's power that can bring about real change in our lives.

Now the fourth benefit of honesty, of admitting our mistakes is deeper fellowship with others. You know a lot of us live with this myth that if we are open about our fears, our struggles, our imperfections people are going to think less of us. But actually

the opposite is usually true. I find myself drawn to people who are open about their struggles, who dare to live in a more transparent way. It draws me into their lives and helps me be more willing to share on a deeper level with them.

Finally, there is a fourth way that we can help each other grow, and that is by ENCOURAGING each other's COMMITMENT. In 1st Timothy we hear, "Train yourself in godliness." What does this mean? How do we train ourselves for godliness? First, we do it with others. We stay close to a small group of people who support us in our commitments and we get a spiritual partner. For many, many years I have had a spiritual partner, someone I check in with at least a couple of times a month to make sure that I am staying on track with my commitments. Secondly, we rededicate ourselves to the ancient commitments of the Christian church...those things that have helped people of faith in every generation grow for the past 2,000 years.

I'd like to review them as we close. First we commit to love Jesus Christ. Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. That's what we call worship. Help each other make worship with others and prayer a top commitment in your life. Second, we commit to loving others. Once we are in a church family God gives us the challenge of learning how to get along with each other. That's what the church has traditionally called koinonia, the Greek word for fellowship...fellowship on a very deep level...the kind you can get in a small group. Third, commit to grow in Christian teaching. God has given us the Scripture as a guide that can help us get a picture of how we can become more and more like Christ, and what God wants us to be about in this world. So commit yourself to learning more about this book. The fourth commitment is serving in ministry. You have been given all kinds of resources, your time, your talents, and your money in order to bless the world. God wants you to use them for that purpose, not just for your own benefit. The fifth commitment is to share the good news. And we have often shared that in this church we do that with our words and with our loving actions. So we help each other grow by encouraging each other's commitments.

Spiritual growth is a choice. Someone once said that we are as close to God as we choose to be. So let me close with these questions. What is your next step? What do you need in order to continue in your spiritual growth? Who is there to help you? And who are you there to help? We can't do it alone, but we can do it together. Thanks be to God. Amen.