

Alright, hey everybody, welcome to Valley Creek from wherever you are watching this. Can we go ahead and just welcome each other together today? It is good to be together. And here we are in a brand new series called Wrapped: Finishing the Year with Healthy Relationships. You see, before we wrap any presents, before we wrap up the semester, before we wrap up a busy schedule, it's really important that we finish this year well. This is the most important year of your spiritual journey and so a great way to finish it well is to finish it with healthy relationships in your life. You see, Jesus tells us that one of his most important -- one of his most prominent commandments is to love each other deeply. And the way that we love each other deeply is that we actually demonstrate and we sacrifice for one another, somebody who loves deeply, somebody who demonstrates and sacrifices for those in their life. So today, we are going to talk about how to demonstrate some love to those around us. We're actually going to hear from three different speakers who have a great word for us about seven minutes each.

They each have a practical way that you can demonstrate in your healthy relationships in your life. So here we go. Lean into this. Get ready to receive because it's really good. Ready, set, here we go.

Well, we are wrapping up 2021 with healthy relationships. And one of the best ways that we can do that is with thankfulness and gratitude. So I got to tell you, recently, I had the opportunity to hang out for a couple of days with a three-year-old and it was so fun and tiring and fun. And one of the things that I learned that was so just it impacted me was this sweet boy's gratitude. He was thankful for everything. And in his sweet voice he would thank me, thank you, thank you shoes Esther, thank you snacks. Like he just even thanked me for washing his hands.

And at first, I'm like, this kid is just so stinking cute. And he's so polite. But then it hit me, it was way more than politeness, it was way more than just great manners, it was the humility of his thankfulness that was so compelling. Like this young boy was not having any entitlement at all, but he lived with a genuine spirit of gratitude, and it's rare and it's so compelling. And the Christmas story is full of compelling stories of thankfulness and gratitude. Like do you remember the story of Mary and the angel Gabriel, and Mary said yes to the invitation of becoming the mother of Jesus? Well, after that, she took some time and she went to be with her cousin in a different city because she just needed some time to process and ponder. So you can imagine Mary showing up at Elizabeth's door, just like, hey cuz, have I got something to tell you?

See, there's this guy Joseph and he asked me to marry him and so we got engaged and then there was this angel and long story long, I'm going to be the mother of Jesus the Messiah. Whoa. Okay, check out how Elizabeth responds, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear." The first reaction she had was to bless Mary and to bless the unborn baby. But this next sentence is really fascinating. Check this out, "Why am I so favored that

the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Huh. What is she actually saying here? She's saying, thank you, thank you for sharing your life with me. Thank you for letting me celebrate with you. Thank you for sharing your joy. Thank you for being my friend.

Elizabeth recognized the goodness and grace of God being displayed to her through Mary, so she stopped and said, thank you. And when you think of it, Elizabeth's gratitude for Mary is really significant because Elizabeth could have reacted totally the opposite way. You see, Elizabeth was expecting her first baby. In fact, she had struggled for decades with infertility, and through a miracle of God, she was expecting a baby. So it's not hard to imagine that Elizabeth could have felt a little bit indignant about celebrating Mary's news. Like are you kidding me right now girl? You just show up at my house and you want to talk all about you and all the things going on in your life. Like don't I deserve to talk about what's going on in my life? You're not telling me that your baby's better than my baby, are you? Come on, are you for real?

I probably would have reacted like that because if we're honest, the spirit of entitlement has crept into our relationships and we think things like, I deserve more, I deserve better. Don't you know what I'm going through? Don't you know what I've sacrificed for you? And we miss the opportunity to see God's goodness and grace being displayed to us through them. See, the spirit of entitlement is really easy to absorb, but it is not a characteristic of the kingdom of God. In fact, it's a lie. It's this baseline fear that comes and tells us that God is good to everybody else but you, you're going to miss out. But that's not true, God is good and He is good to you. He's given you everything. He's given you Jesus. And because of Jesus, you can say thanks to the people around you. And because of Jesus, you can see God's goodness and grace being displayed to you through them.

See, when we hear the phrase, give thanks, we automatically think of giving thanks to God and that is right and that is true, He deserves all our thanks, but I would submit to you that there are people all around you that you need to thank. Like I think maybe we've taken some folks for granted this year in our relationships. But we're wrapping up 2021 with healthy relationships so we don't have to end like that. So how do we do this? How do we thank the people all around us? Well, it starts by stopping, stopping and acknowledging all the people around you that enrich and benefit your life. And then say thank you. Like literally look them in the eye and thank them, simply specifically and out loud. Simply, like just say it the way you would say it. You are not a wordsmith. You don't work for Hallmark. You don't have to make it rhyme. Just say it like you would say it. But make it specific.

Like what are the things? Tell them some details of why you're thankful. We've all had those fly by thank yous where somebody goes, hey, thanks for that. Yeah, you're welcome. I think, maybe, I don't know. So it doesn't really help, so make it specific. And then out loud, like sometimes we just think that people know that we're grateful. Like he knows, she knows. Do they? I don't know. Say it out loud. Like what if you were to thank your spouse for going to

work every day to help provide for your family? Or what about thanking your child's teacher for investing in your kiddo every day. Or what about thanking that student that invited you to sit with them at lunch? Or what about thanking the mail and delivery people that bring things to our house every day to make our lives easier? Because ultimately, the things that we're thanking them for point us to Jesus. Jesus is our provider, Jesus invests everything into us. Jesus invites us into relationship and Jesus lifts our burdens over and over again.

Jesus reminds us who he is to us through them. So we say thank you. The impact of one thank you seems small, but the cumulative effect is massive because gratitude builds on itself. Think of a train. It takes a long time to get that big machine moving, but once it does it picks up momentum and it's hard to stop. The same with gratitude, it builds on itself and gratitude becomes our default. Just like with my sweet three-year-old friend, gratitude is the default. Saying thank you simply, specifically and out loud is a tool that builds and rebuilds relationships. So here's my question for you, who is one person you need to thank?

Well, it's that time of year, it's December, Christmas, and I love everything about this time of year. I love the lights, I love the music, I love the movies. And what I may love more than anything else about Christmas is perhaps that little bit of chill that like starts to come into the air. Not necessarily because I like love the cold, but I love everything that the cold brings. Like you know what I mean? Like I love -- I love the jackets you get to wear. I love the blankets you snuggle under. I love the cup of hot chocolate. And my favorite place this time of year is sitting down in my living room, hot cup of chocolate, blanket and staring at a wood burning fireplace. Man, I love a great wood burning fireplace.

But here's my question, what happens to that fire over time? Like if you just simply stop adding wood to the fire, the fire just burns a little bit lower and a little bit lower. And before long, it's going to be nothing but embers and ash. See, I think that's a picture of what can so easily happen to our hearts in this season. Just like wood getting taken from a fireplace, discouragement can come in and start to steal the courage that we had in our hearts. And so maybe you actually felt this before, maybe you've actually started this year and your fire was like all ablaze, like 2021, man, this is going to be the year. Everything changes. Everything turns around. And then the world lets you down, and your fire just starts to burn a little bit lower. Or you start a new friendship or a relationship, and you're like, man, this is going to be the greatest relationship year of my life and then someone lets you down and your fire burns a little bit lower.

Or maybe, maybe, just maybe, you let yourself down and all of a sudden it kind of can feel like you're just embers and ash. Doesn't that feel like maybe what the world's experienced lately? Can I tell you, the relationships in your life are desperate for some encouragement. So one of the ways we need to finish this year with healthier relationships is simply by encouraging one another. It's just like Joseph experienced in the Christmas story. You know Joseph's story and I'm willing to bet that Joseph started his year and his fire was pretty big. And he was excited

about being engaged to Mary and the life that he was going to have with her, and then he got some news. And all of a sudden, it's like his fire wanted to go out. But God sends an angel to give Joseph his courage back. It says this in Matthew 1, "An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.'"

See, when Joseph was at his lowest moment, God shows up to place courage back into Joseph and say, Joseph, do not be afraid. See, if discouragement is the removal of courage then encouragement is giving someone their courage back. And that is fantastic news because guess what, that means the discouraged relationships in your life, they don't have to stay that way. You can be an encourager this Christmas. You can be the one to help reignite the fire inside of their hearts. See, let me give you three quick thoughts, three quick thoughts of how we can encourage the discouraged relationships in our life. Number one, you cannot change their circumstances, but you can strengthen the person.

See, think about it this way. You can't keep it from getting colder outside, you can't change their circumstances. But you know what you could do, you could build a bigger fire. See, people don't need you to downplay their circumstances, they need you to strengthen them in their circumstances. God demonstrated this even to Joseph. You see, God didn't actually remove Joseph from his circumstances. In fact, he didn't even change Joseph's circumstances. Instead, he said, Joseph son of David, do not be afraid and placed courage back into Joseph. Number two is encourage people for who they are, not what they do. See, the world values everyone off of what they can contribute, what they can achieve, but in Jesus people are valued for who they are, not what they can do. Another way to think about this is people are not valued for what they can do but for what God already did.

See, in Jesus, Jesus by going to the cross has already declared and demonstrated that they are loved, they are worthy and so you can declare and demonstrate you are so loved. You are so worthy. I am so thankful for who God made you to be. And so you can strengthen who they are, not what they do. And the third and final thing, this one's perhaps the most important. Encourage someone as specifically as possible. See, if I was going to reignite a fire, perhaps the best place for me to place a piece of wood would be right in the center. And so specific encouragement, if it's placing courage into someone, then the more specific the more center it is in their heart. And so every single one of you has experienced this before, it's the difference between getting a gift card for Christmas and getting a really thoughtful gift for someone that says, I thought about you, I see you, and so I just really thought that you would like this.

See, we appreciate the gift card, but something about a specific gift really does change our hearts. And so just like it takes thoughtfulness to give a great gift, it will take thoughtfulness to give someone courage. But what if we did this? What if before you go to whoever that you need to encourage this Christmas and you just ask the Lord, Lord show me where this person needs courage right now specifically, and then go to them. Go to them and say, dad, man, I'm

so grateful for your spirit of generosity. In a world that's just gotten all obsessed with themselves, I'm so grateful for you. Friend, I'm so grateful for your perseverance. I've made mistakes, people around you have made mistakes, and you haven't given up on any of us. Thank you. That is specific encouragement that ignites the flame back into their heart.

So can I encourage you, just like God sent an angel to encourage Joseph, God is sending you to encourage the discouraged relationships in your life. The only question left is who is one person that you need to encourage.

Alright, so what if Christmas wasn't about the presents? I know, I said that out loud. But we learned how to forgive last week, so we're good. You know, but what if Christmas wasn't about the presents, but it was about being present? You know, like in the moment, focused on the relationships in your life. Like it's super simple to do, but it's actually one of the hardest things to do.

But as we're finishing up the year with healthy relationships, I believe that being present is something that we're all going to be able to do because our relationships matter. And they matter so much so that Paul even reminds us all over the Scriptures like, man, take more interest in what matters to others instead of what matters to you. And basically what he's saying is that not being present is kind of selfish and we have to think about what matters more to them than what matters to us. And let's be kind of honest this year as we look back at the year, selfishness has kind of bubbled up at the surface of our hearts and we've been really focused on the relationship of me, myself and I, right? Can you relate with that? I know I can. But man, I'm encouraging you with this like you don't have to stay there. We've learned along the way that if we point our heart and our feet in the direction of the right path, like everything changes and we can be the people who are the most present with the relationships in our lives. And we can actually learn a lot about this principle from the Christmas story, specifically from the shepherds.

You know, you're probably thinking to yourself like what in the world do shepherds have to teach me about relationships and being present? Everything. Man, like everything. And shepherds had a lot of things to do as they're shepherding, as they're doing their thing with the sheep. Like they have to go out and take them to graze. They had to take them to water. They had to keep them safe from drowning and wolves and all the things. And as they go through their to-do list, it would have been so easy for shepherds to lose focus to go and wander around. But they don't do that. And in Luke chapter 2, here we have shepherds doing what they do, they're hanging with their sheep and this is what it says. It says, "That night in a field near Bethlehem, shepherds were watching over their flocks. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared in radiant splendor." Like there it is. Before the angels showed up, what were they doing? They were keeping watch. They were focused on each other and what was going on around them, and then the angel of the Lord appeared and the radiance of the Lord surrounded them. Like that's incredible.

And you're familiar with the story. Later on, the angel goes on to declare the good news of great joy. So being present led to the Lord's radiance, the Lord's radiance led to the good news, the good news led to great joy. But what if -- let me just ask you this, what if the shepherds weren't being present in that moment? Like what if they weren't paying attention and Luke chapter 2 actually read like this, "There were shepherds living out in a field nearby, one was watching over the cowboys game that was on TV, the others were scrolling through social media on their phones not paying attention to their flocks, a few sheep ran away and drowned in a nearby river, wolves got a hold of some others, whoa, and then the angel of the Lord appeared, but couldn't get their attention so the radiance of the Lord left and the good news of great joy was never declared. Like come on, that would be a horrible Christmas story, wouldn't it? But it doesn't read like that because the shepherds were present in that moment.

Man, I don't know about you but I don't want my relationships to go down in a river or get eaten by wolves, like I want to be present with them so the Lord's radiance can be present with me. Man, I want you to be present with the relationships in your life so the Lord's radiance can be present with you. But how do we take the lesson we learned from the shepherds and apply it to our lives? Like it's actually kind of simple, I don't have three things for you. I just have one, so I want to invite you to do this. Take a deep breath. Okay, we're good. It starts with putting our phones down. I know. I know I said it, putting our phones down. It's so simple. But man, it's so hard for us to do, isn't it? Like we carry that thing everywhere we go, but man, let's be intentional about putting those things down, turning the TV off, because I believe that as we do, we the people of Valley Creek are going to be the most present people in our relationships. We're going to experience exactly what the shepherds experienced that first Christmas.

And we want the radiance of the Lord to be present with us as we're hanging out with our relationships. And as you're putting the phone down, you might be thinking to yourself like, alright, now I got all kinds of time. What am I going to do with it? You can do all kinds of things. Then you can go for walks. You can have meaningful conversations with the people in your life. You can take advantage of that road trip if you're traveling or you could play a game. You see, my family loves to play games. I mean card games, board games, any kind of game, you name it. Come on, any game people here? Man, you're my people. You are my people. Man, we love playing games. And as our older two kiddos are getting a little bit older -- and we recently started playing Scrabble. Man, I love playing Scrabble and so do they. The only problem is that they're getting really good at it. So I do what any good parent would do, I start memorizing the Scrabble dictionary so I can win. Like come on, I'm a little competitive. But man the other day, we were playing Scrabble and a word got challenged but we didn't have the dictionary handy, so I said, alright, no problem. Let me grab my phone and start looking this up to make sure the word was legit because, you know, I like to win.

So I started looking for it and what turned into look up for the word actually turned into some scrolling, some distraction and before I knew it, my kids called me out for being on my phone. Like man, even as we were playing a game, where being present is key, like you got to pay attention to be able to win at Scrabble, like I got distracted and got called out on it. And maybe that just happens to me. But man, it's super important to be engaged and not be distracted. And so as we're finishing the year off with our healthy relationships, man, as we're taking those walks, as we're having those meaningful conversations, as we're taking advantage of that road trip with no technology, man, I want to just encourage you we can experience what the shepherds did that first Christmas because the healthiest relationships that we should have are with those closest to us.

And like parents, let me speak to you real quick. Like I know, like I get it, it's busy and our phones are incredible tools, but we only have so many more Christmases with our kids at home. Like students, like lean into the relationships, be in the moment. You only have a handful of Christmases at home before you graduate and go off to college or graduate college and start your own life and your own journey. And what would it look like for all of us to, man, put the phones down, turn the TV off and be present with the relationships in our lives and we experience exactly what the shepherds did that first Christmas, being present with each other so that the Lord's radiance can be present with us, so that we can experience the good news of great joy in our relationships. So as we're finishing off the year with healthy relationships, who is one person that you need to be present with?

Okay. So that was really good and really convicting. And I just want to encourage all of us, man, those are simple ideas, simple concepts. They are profound and profoundly important to implement into our healthy relationships. And so what we started with is just to literally say thank you, to express gratitude. We talked about encouraging, placing courage into somebody and then right then to be present with those in our life. So would you just close your eyes with me for a moment? And let's just invite Jesus into that. Those are great encouragements for us, great ways for us to demonstrate our love in the relationships in our life. Jesus, we just invite you into those things, those three areas. And we want to actually carry them out this Christmas season. We know that this is the most important year of our spiritual journey. And right in the middle of that as we finish up this year is the relationships in our life. Jesus, will you help us? Will you help us do those things, the simple things that are so profound in our relationships?

Will you go before us in the conversations, in those moments, in the difficult -- the difficult relationships that maybe we haven't been able to navigate? Show us where to say thank you, show us how to encourage and put another log on the fire, show us how to stay in the moment and be present like you were because we know that you have amazing things when we are. So God, I just -- I pray over each one of us just a newfound sense of just like the depth and the importance of healthy relationships in our life. Like any place where we've seen it modeled badly or a broken example of it in the world, may we look to you Jesus and may we look to

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your example and how you related to us, and even now how you call us to relate to one another. We love you Jesus. In your name, amen.