

Encouragement!

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[0 : 0 0] Now we're going to look this morning for a little while, it's a standalone sermon and we're going to look at the life of Barnabas.

So we are going to be in Acts but it's not part of the series that we've just finished. But it's quite good because we're still in Acts so there's a link to what we've been studying over the last number of months.

And it kind of dovetails well with Cody's sermon last Sunday night on friendship, which he preached from Proverbs and we've been looking at Proverbs in the evening.

So there's quite a nice dovetailing between the two. Sorry if you weren't here last Sunday evening. But there is a link between the kind of friendship that Proverbs speaks about and also the encouragement that is personified in the life of Barnabas.

And I hope that we can think about the theme of encouragement this morning for a little while. It's a gift of God. Romans 8 to 12 speaks about the different gifts and if you are encourager then be someone who encourages.

[1 : 0 6] And we know that it's interesting. Acts speaks a lot about the importance of encouragement, a gift of the Holy Spirit. I think it's a gift that is specially recognized in some people.

In other words, some people are really special encouragers. It's also a gift of common grace so that anyone, whether they're Christians or not, can be encourager.

But it is something that for all of us as Christians and with Christ we can develop example, mimic and pray more for in our Christian lives.

I think we need it. It's mentioned often in the Book of Acts and it's seen in different ways. I think in Romans chapter 1, 11 and 12 we have a reference as long as I see it that it's in part to some spiritual gift to strengthen you that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith both yours and mine.

So there's this sense there and also in Romans 15, you know what I was written in the former days was written for our instruction that through the endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope, may the God of endurance and encouragement give you life, give you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Jesus Christ.

[2 : 3 3] So there's this great sense in which the New Testament church in Acts was one where the leaders sought to encourage the people and likewise they encouraged one another. Also that we should be encouraged in response to the truth so you shouldn't really come to church and go away feeling miserable and wretched.

You should be encouraged under the challenge, yes. You shouldn't fall asleep. It shouldn't be so horrific. It shouldn't just send you off into a days of sleep.

It should be spiritually encouraging and as we see the character of God we recognize that that's His work. His work is to encourage us in our Christian faith.

So the challenge this morning for us I hope is to look into our own hearts, into our own relationships, marriage, Christian relationships with your boss, work, whatever it might be, your own relationships, your relationships with other Christians.

And think about your life and think about how easy it is today for you to be discouraged and how easy it is actually to be discouraging.

[3 : 4 4] We can do both in other words. We can discourage and we can be discouraged in our lives. We face in our Christian lives a huge internal battle, don't we?

We know grace and we know God and we know forgiveness but we do face a huge ongoing battle against selfishness, negativity and discouragement.

That comes much easier to us. We naturally are discouragers and we are naturally discouraged. But the great thing about grace is a beautiful mark of not just common grace but saving grace that Christ motivated to be an encourager.

And I just want to—oh, I'm going to use this word a lot today—encourage you to be encouragers, okay? And we encourage one another. Life is short.

We struggle in battle with lots of different things. And Jesus placed Barnabas, God placed Barnabas right at the heart of leadership in the New Testament church.

[4 : 56] Was he a big shot? Was he a great academic? Was he a man of outstanding faith? He may have been all these things. But what he's remembered for and what God placed him in the church for as a leader was to be an encourager alongside Paul.

Encourager, very important. That fledgling early young church saw the need, God saw the need that they were encouraged. And we see what happens when they, at different points, are discouraged and how deflating and difficult it was for them.

So I want to look at Barnabas and look at his character this morning. There's five particular passages in Acts. We're not going to look at them in any detail, but they just give us a little bit of a perspective.

Build up a character picture of Barnabas for us. And in Acts chapter 4 and verse 36, we're told that Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means sons of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, he was a prophet.

He was part of that early church. And therefore, he was a Cypriot Jew. He would have, at the diaspora, when people all left Judea and Jerusalem, he would have settled in Cyprus.

[6 : 15] And so he was Jewish by culture and by religion, but he had been brought up in Cyprus. So he was someone who knew a different culture and he knew a different language and would have known a different perspective on life, which I think is interesting.

And he was given a nickname. He was given a nickname by the disciples. He was called Barnabas, son of encouragement. And that is because they knew him and they knew his character.

I think nicknames are great sometimes. I wonder what my nickname is from ULOT. And you ought to see the nicknames I have for ULOT. They're great.

But this was good nickname, wasn't it? This was a by-name that he was given because it reflected his character. He was known by the early church. His reputation, his gift was clear and known.

He was an encourager, son of encouragement, very positive. And the other other references we have in Acts give us a reflect on what that looked like for him as a Christian leader.

[7 : 23] And one of the first things was that he was generous. We are told that he, in the next verse to the one we read, that he had a piece of land in Cyprus and he sold it and brought the money to the feet of the disciples in Jerusalem.

He was generous. He owned land. He recognized the gospel need and he gave the money. And not only was he generous in that way, but he encouraged it in other times. We read in the passage we read in Acts chapter 11, it talked about the great famine that was going to come.

And so he encouraged the church in Antioch to raise money, to bring it back to the disciples in Jerusalem. And he was someone who enthused and encouraged others to be generous.

And also we learn later on in his life, or in Acts rather, that he was one of the few apostles who didn't take any salary or any wage for being an apostle.

He worked himself and supported himself rather than taking money from the young church. So he was generous and he had this generous spirit which encouraged other people.

[8 : 38] But he also was someone who took risks on other people. His generosity was reflected, not just financially or as encouragement, it wasn't just financial, but it was also the way he was generous in the way he responded to other people.

In Acts chapter 9, we have verses 26 and 27. He was the first person really to take Saul seriously as a disciple.

And when they'd come to Jerusalem, they attempted to join the disciples, that is Saul. And they were afraid of him, for they did not believe he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had been seen by the Lord, who spoke to him and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

So he was willing there very early on to have a generous attitude towards Paul, where the other disciples were kind of dodgy and afraid. He trusted in the forgiveness and in the testimony and in

the conversion of Saul.

He was willing to go out on a limb for him. As he was for John Mark in Acts chapter 15, there's an account I'll mention this later, of a great, great big fallout in the leadership between Paul and Barnabas.

[9 : 54] And it's over John Mark who had previously deserted them in their first missionary journey. But Barnabas was willing to take John Mark again on the second journey and forgive him and give him a fresh start.

He was positive about allowing John Mark. Now we might say a little bit more about that. There might be a little bit more to that that is not so good. But anyway, we'll maybe mention that later if we have time.

And in the account we read here, he's sent by the church in Jerusalem to Antioch. He's a son of encouragement and he's going to see this young church and the report back as an ambassador of the church.

And he's positive that these Gentiles are coming to faith. This is a new movement. God is working in the Gentiles just as much as the Jews. And he's willing to accept that and return back with that message.

So he's generous. He took risks for others and his encouragement also developed in the way that he was a team leader. We see that in his work with Paul and his work with John Mark.

[10 : 57] But also in his willingness here to seek out trainee and gifted leaders, the church in Antioch, he sees the need of the church. And so he sends for, who's he sent for?

He sends for Saul. This man who's been converted, he's got great teaching gifts. And he says, Saul, you come back and you come back and work with me here and we'll teach this young church. Now, what's interesting about that, and it's a great mark of good leadership, great encouragement, is that when Paul comes or Saul comes and they work together, and in the chapter we read it's Barnabas and Paul, but as time goes on, we see that Luke changes things and it becomes Paul and Barnabas.

Paul becomes the main man. He's younger, he's your Christian. Barnabas is an older, mature Christian, but he sees the gifts that Paul has and he's willing to take a back seat.

He's willing to encourage him. He's willing him to be the most significant player and we see that even Luke recognizes that the weight of responsibility changes from Barnabas and Paul together to Paul and Barnabas in.

And that's a great encouraging mark in leadership and a great encouraging mark that he shows here. So he's someone who, Sipriyadru, he's got a great nickname as an encourager and that is reflected in his, the account we have.

[12 : 29] And we recognize as we read here that he is a spirit filled Christian. We recognize and see in verse 24 that he was a man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, a good man.

Okay? It's Barnabas' son of encouragement. He understood grace. He understood his need for and dependence on God and that attract, that made him attractive and it molded his character.

He didn't have grace in a box that he took out on a Sunday and put on. He didn't have grace for an emergency that he used only as the fourth emergency service.

He was someone who lived grace and who put that grace into practice as a son of encouragement. A good man full of the Holy Spirit and a central leader in the early church.

He was a great teacher, he was a great evangelist. Lots of people came to faith through his teaching. He was an encourager of young Christians to remain true to the faith.

[13 : 35] We see that in verse 23 where he exhorted them and encouraged them, this young Christian church in Antioch, to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purposes.

So we see that some of these are some of the characteristics that are spoken of by Barnabas. But we also do recognise, in case you think this is flowery and sweet and that he had a great life of ease as he went around and patted everyone in the back and was a great encourager, his life was also not plain sailing.

And that for us, I hope, is an encouragement, is that his life wasn't plain sailing. It's not that we look at Barnabas and see some unattainable Christian giant who was just brilliant towards everyone.

He wasn't perfect, he's not Jesus. He makes mistakes. He lives in an imperfect church with imperfect leaders. And he's an imperfect leader.

And he lives in a world which is broken and difficult. And so it's not all plain sailing for him. Just a couple of things that I've already mentioned. The first is at one point we see that he lost sight of grace himself.

[14:51] We're told in Galatians 2 and verse 13, where Paul's speaking about the problems of legalism in the church and he says, the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

Can you imagine that? Barnabas the son of encouragement. Barnabas the one who went to Antioch and who said, yes, let's recognize the great work that Jews are doing. He is led astray by the legalists who come up from Jerusalem and say, no, the Gentile Christians must be circumcised and they must obey the law of Moses.

They're only half-baked Christians. They're not real Christians. They're only sort of Christians. They haven't grown up through our tradition and he falls into that legalism in Antioch and Paul roasts them for that.

Paul blasts them for their legalism. Right at the core, at the early point of the church, it's vital to get rid of the cancer of moralistic legalism in the church and he roasts them for being so hypocritical and legalistic.

The great thing is that Barnabas clearly responds to that and he then later, of course, defends the church in Antioch to the leaders in Jerusalem and forgiveness for him therefore was wrought in the fires of failure.

[16:27] That's important, isn't it? We recognize our own failure and his willingness and his encouragement to forgive others came from his own experience of being forgiven both by Paul and by the Lord Jesus for his legalistic attitude.

So at one point he lost sight of grace and that's recorded. But also he has this huge disagreement, as I mentioned earlier with Paul in Acts 15 verses 37 to 39.

Barnabas wanted to take with him on their missionary journey, John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take him with him, one who had withdrawn from them in Pampholite and had not gone with them to the work.

There was a sharp disagreement so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. Sails away. The great thing is that as Paul goes with Timothy, Othytus and Barnabas goes with John Mark they kind of double up the work.

But we're not given much insight into what happened there. Was it that deep down that he struggled a little bit with Paul's dominance, Paul's rise to significance, or was it he struggled with Paul's belligerence and his lack of forgiveness of John Mark, lack of giving him a second chance?

[17:49] John Mark was a relation of Barnabas's. So there may have been a little bit of blood being thicker than grace, I guess, that he might have just sided with his own cousin or relation rather than with Paul, we don't know.

But the interesting thing is they agreed to disagree and went their separate ways and served the Lord Jesus Christ. And it seemed that they still, we don't hear much about them, but did seem to get on and continue with the work together.

But it's not always easy to work with others, we know that. We all know that as leaders in the church. We all know that within the church. But one of, probably one of the temptations of being an encourager, negative temptation to being an encourager, is being a people pleaser.

Maybe on this occasion Barnabas was just desperate to please John Mark and keep everyone, try and keep everyone happy.

And that is possible, it never works. It never works to be a people pleaser. But we can see the difference between encouragement and people pleasing in the life of Barnabas.

[19:05] So the gift of encouragement, we've seen his life, we've seen what the Bible teaches at least at some level. What lessons can we take from Barnabas and from the teaching of the Bible about encouragement in our own Christian community, in your own family, in your workplace, where you're studying, whatever it might be.

How can we develop, maybe you have a special gift of encouragement that God has given you by the Holy Spirit, how can you develop and nurture that? Maybe by nature you're a pessimist and a discourager, the glass is always half empty.

In Scotland we're all like that. It's just part of our culture and our background is Calvinistic, Presbyterian, Reign Dwellers. We tend to be that way sometimes.

But how can we take generosity and recognise it as a hugely significant biblical characteristic? And what does it mean?

Does it just mean slapping someone in the back and telling them to carry on going? Not so. I think the first thing, and I've just mentioned three things. The first thing is rooted in grace and truth.

[20 : 20] That's hugely significant. We see that in Barnabas. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and that's recorded as being significant. It's grounded in the truth of the Gospel.

He knew all about himself and that enabled him to be redeemed, forgiven and encourager to others. He was a teacher of what he had received.

And it wasn't for him just a natural character. It wasn't just the kind of guy he was. But it was because he was a good man in Christ, full of the Holy Spirit that he became an encourager.

That gives encouragement, a deep hue, a deep colour in our lives, because it means we're mimicking the time in our day-to-day lives to look at Jesus Christ, eyeball to eyeball, and see His character, and how He should be reflected in our lives.

What it is, is mimicking the nature of God. That's what it is. That's what encouragement is. The God who is the encourager. In our style of leadership, in our style of membership, in our style of recognising Christian community, we are seeking that reflection of God in our encouragement.

[21 : 44] In one of the passages we read in the speech about God encouraging unity through that, that's glorifying to God. And encouragement is a great way towards that. You know that, don't you?

You know today in your Christian life the road is very steep for you and the battles are very real in your Christian life, and you know that it's so easy to be knocked down and that so many people knock us down.

And you know that there's so many tears when people discourage us and expose our failings and faults and our impotence and our ignorance and our uselessness.

Why does that discourage us? Because we know it anyway. We know it. We don't really need it to be trumpeted by everybody else. We know our own failures and we don't need discouragement.

Yes, we need accountability. Yes, we need to be told the truth and love, but we don't need to be given quick words of discouragement as we walk on our road.

[22 : 49] It's like a marathon in the Christian life, isn't it? We need endurance, and in this Christian life we are amateurs. There's only one professional and that's the Lord Jesus Christ, and we need His help and His greatness and His promises and His power and His friendship.

And we need the encouragement of one another. Do you remember what Corey was saying last Sunday evening about friendship from the book of Proverbs? It's that love that is shoulder to shoulder with people, but becomes eye to eye.

It's the importance of having people that will walk shoulder to shoulder with you and the encouragement of that, but that it deepens into becoming something where we are eye to eye spiritual encouragers.

I don't want St. Columbus to be full of matesy mates, good old friends that are just friendly now and again or friendly in a superficial, shallow, meaningless way, but encouragers, deep seated, deeply rooted encouragers in Jesus Christ in the way that Barnabas was.

Now that is really tough. That is far tougher than being legalistic, for example, and far tougher than being judgmental, and far tougher than being discouraging, and a perfectionist.

[24 : 18] So it's rooted in grace and truth, and therefore the second characteristic of it is generosity. We see that wholeheartedly with Barnabas, doesn't it?

And so we'll be encouragers if we are generous with all the resources God has given to us and with our spirit, with our very being.

So if you'll find that parallels in Scripture, you'll find discouragement is often paralleled with meanness, meanness of the use of our resources, of our time, of our gifts that God has poured out and probably most significantly mean spirited towards other people.

That's where discouragement finds its root, in meanness, in being willing to always think the worst about people, to be willing to be quick to condemn and criticise whether it's in church leadership or any kind of leadership across several situations recently, not personal, not here, generally, but in lots of different walks of life.

Leaders are accountable, of course, in the workplace and the home and in the church and elsewhere and politics, but it's an easy shot to always be critical of those in these positions and to be a discourager and always to know better than what they're seeking to do.

[25 : 53] And the Christian gospel is set up in such a way where submission is important. All of us as leaders and as people together are submissive under Christ and encouragers for Him.

Being discouraging often is about making ourselves important and significant, but the opposite encouragement is so transformational, so radical and so uplifting.

It's something I know you crave and I know I crave, we all crave in current rightful grace and truth filled encouragement that we need to strive for here, in our families, in our marriages, in our workplaces.

And we have seen at many different levels huge amounts of generosity in St. Columba's, at a personal level. We've seen it financially in the way God's provided for us, particularly in our church plants and in so many different ways.

God pouring out His Spirit upon us in our ability to develop staffing and helping in Nepal and in mission situations and it's a great encouragement and your resources, your time, what you give, how you're willing to open your homes and your hearts, it's such an encouragement and you know it is great to receive that.

[27 : 19] So generosity rooted in grace and truth and lastly and very briefly, also it's self-forgetful. You see that with Barnabas, don't you? He's self-forgetful in his willingness for God to have the glory for Paul to take first place in leadership and to forgive and work with John Mark and others.

He's willing to train others, invest in them, spend time with them. As an older, mature believer, he's willing to spend time with Paul and let him take that position and he's willing to encourage young Christians in Antioch and it's a great thing here also, self-forgetfulness.

Self-forgetfulness can be a great mark of an encourager, someone who is willing to forgive, willing to nurture, willing to give the second chance.

Now we have the privilege of over this last probably eight year to 18 months to have welcomed a number of older members into the congregation. A great deficit that we had previously and an astonishing blessing to have them and they have the privilege of being able to share from their lives with this very young in many ways congregation.

And as older Christians we remember what we were like, we ought to and as we do so it helps us to be encouragers of others, of young Christians in particular and self-forget, we're willing for others to take the credit, we're willing for others to take the limelight, we're willing to take risks with people, we ought to be willing to stand aside and let others flourish and put the glory of God before ourselves, before our noses being out of joint, before our traditions, before our power, before our importance.

[29 : 20] We can encourage as we have the freedom of grace and the perspective of belonging to Jesus and our identity being in Him, we can encourage others even if it means we are always in the background, if it means that, well, we move on quickly, don't we, from the scene of time, we're only here for a while and we will soon be forgotten.

Generosity and self-forgetfulness in Christ gives us a generous serving spirit as we recognize our frailty and the forgiveness that we've had and the encouragement we've received.

You remember, don't you, the people that encouraged you in your fledgling Christian faith, you remember the older people that took you aside and spoke to you lovingly about Jesus, you remember the people when you made mistakes, forgave you and corrected you in love, you remember the encouragers because they were so important and probably because they were so rare because we also remember the discouragers and those who broke our spirit and those who made us want to give up the Christian faith.

It's interesting, isn't it? Why do we preach? We preach the living word because we hope it encourages. We hope it lifts us to a place where we want to be.

We hope it makes us fall on our knees pleading for the forgiveness that we seek and that we want to offer others. We hope it enables us at least sometimes to soar on wings like eagles on the current of grace that has transformed our own lives and fallen on our knees also to pray for change.

[31 : 07] A community of encouragers, wouldn't that be a great epitaph for this congregation? Not that I think it will ever die, but just in case we did, that we would be a community of encouragers, good people full of the Holy Spirit like God, and it comes from knowing grace in our own hearts and the importance of praying for that grace in ourselves and in others.

And if you don't know that grace, you may have the common grace of encouragement that God gave you when you were born, but there's a much deeper, much more significant encouragement

that you will only know as you come to faith in Jesus Christ yourself and the encouragement of salvation that He offers.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, we pray that you would apply your word to us. We know we need your word to be lifted from its pages by the Holy Spirit and breathed into our lives.

And we ask that we would, before we speak today, before we respond or react, before we go to work maybe tomorrow, before we live our lives, that we would think about what we say and what we do and how we live to see whether we are encouragers.

And we know that doesn't mean that we're not going to be honest or we're not going to be accountable or mentoring or leading others, but to do so in love and to do so with grace and to do so recognizing our own hearts.

[32 : 52] Help us, we pray, in all of these things. And we ask that we would be encouraged ourselves and encouragers as people in this day and generation where there does seem, maybe particularly in places like social media, so much abuse and discouragement and negativity and brokenness that can sometimes just tear our hearts apart.

So we ask for your help and for your grace and for your goodness and for your love to reveal itself in our hearts and in our lives for Jesus' sake.

Amen.