

Encouragement

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I want us to look back today at the passage we read together in Acts chapter 12. I'm not going to stay exclusively in this passage because today we're going to do a character study for part of our time and then apply that into our own hearts and lives.

And it's a character study on Barnabas who we read about in this account and we read about him in different places in the book of Acts.

And really, in a sense, it's a character study, but it's also looking at a gift, a spiritual gift that I think we should all aspire to in our lives more and more.

And that's the gift of encouragement. And Barnabas was called son of encouragement. And that's really what we're going to look at today is the importance of encouragement in our Christian lives, the importance of being encouragers because we know the value of being encouraged ourselves in our Christian lives.

And I think as we come to the end of the year, it's a good thing to consider what the last year has been like for us in terms of that characteristic, in terms of how we've lived our lives in relation to other people and also moving forward into the new year.

[1 : 3 1] It's very much a gift from God. It's a gift of the Holy Spirit. Romans 12 verse 8 speaks to us about that gift of the Spirit.

But it's also a grace characteristic that should be in everyone. It's a gift that some people have in great abundance, but it's a grace character that we should all look for in our lives to develop, to example, and to pray more about.

It's also a natural characteristic in people. There's many people who are not Christians who don't love Jesus, who don't know Christ in their lives, who are still great at encouraging.

And that's a gift of common grace that we're thankful for. But we look to our motivation for being good encouragers in our lives to our own relationship with Jesus Christ and why that should motivate and inspire us to give Him the glory in how we relate to other people.

But encouragement is a great theme through the book of Acts, and no more so than through the character of Barnabas himself.

[2 : 4 9] So the challenge you'll be today really, I think, is to, for the short while that we're together, just to look into your own heart, as I need to look into my own heart, to our relationships and to our responses to one another within the church family, but also within our lives at a broader level.

And to look back and recognize how easy it has been over the last year to be discouraging. How easy it is for us to be discouraged in our lives and to recognize that so often we have a huge battle against selfishness and against negativity and discouragement, and that we have a duty and a responsibility and a privilege to be the people that stop that discouragement in our relationship with others and be those who bring hope and grace to them.

So we're looking to the motivation of Christ in our lives and how that should impact the rare beautiful gift of encouragement as a community characteristic, as something we share with other people.

And we're going to look briefly at Barnabas and then apply that character, characteristic to ourselves.

His character is soaked through a lot of sections and acts, but primarily he is... There's five passages where we read about Barnabas.

[4 : 32] And the first is in Acts chapter four, where we actually find out his real name, because Barnabas was just a nickname. His real name was Joseph.

Joseph, we're told in Acts 4, 36, was a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement.

He sold a field and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. Now, it's the first thing we hear about Barnabas is that his real name is Joseph, and he's called Barnabas because that's what his character is like, and that's how he revealed himself or how other people saw him, at least the apostles saw him, and they give him this nickname of Barnabas.

And he was a Cypriot Jew, as we're told there, so he would have left Israel in the diaspora and he was living in Cyprus. So he was someone who already had broadened his horizons a little bit.

He wasn't insular, he wasn't just focused on his own group of people. He had moved to a different part of the world, he knew a different culture, a different language, and that maybe gave him a different perspective on life, which helped him to be an encourager, because maybe there was times when he was very discouraged in having to do that and isolated and alone, and he saw the value of his own relationship with Christ transforming the way he looked at others.

[5 : 59] And he was called here, as we told, son of encouragement. The early apostles recognized that gift in him, his reputation and his character was clear and known.

Isn't that great? I wonder, nicknames tend to be negative, don't they? Not always, but sometimes they tend to be negative. Especially in school, maybe they tend to be negative, where they highlight unexposed weaknesses or failings in us, or character defects or even physical defects.

But I wonder if people were, your friends and neighbors were to give you a nickname. I wonder what it would be. I wonder what our nickname would be. What name, what would be clearly known as?

Could it be something as positive as this son of encouragement? And the other references in Acts refer to or reflect some of what Barnabas' character was like.

He was clearly generous. We're told that here. He's very different from the other couple in the story in Acts who also sold land to Ananias and Sapphira.

[7 : 05] But here he's someone who owned land. He recognized the need of the early church. He sold that land and he gave the money to the leaders of the church to give to those who were in great need and those who benefited from his generosity.

That was a great encouragement, a time of great need. And verse 30 tells us that at a time of famine he was supporting those who were to give money to the disciples in Jerusalem who were suffering under the famine.

Later on we learn that he supported himself rather than take money from the church, from the young church to be a leader and a preacher and a teacher. We also recognize and know that he took risks on other people in his life.

And that was a great encouragement. In Acts chapter 9 we're told of the amazingly pivotal role he had in the development of Saul who became Paul.

When he came to Jerusalem at Saul, and remember Saul's amazing conversion story, he tried to join the disciples but they were all afraid of him believing that, not believing that he was really a disciple because remember he was going to be coming to Jerusalem to prison and to kill Christians and believers, but Barnabas were told, took him in and brought him to the apostles.

[8 : 33] He told them how Saul in his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So he took risks on other people when the kind of established church weren't willing to take a risk on Saul.

Barnabas was a great encourager of Saul and took him before the disciples and he trusted that what God had done was real in his life. And later on we also see that he forgave John Mark.

I'll say a little bit more about that later. But he was willing to give John Mark a second chance after John Mark had deserted the work of the gospel.

He was positive about the church in Antioch which we read about here. He reports back to the church, the main church in Jerusalem about the great things that are happening in this Gentile territory and that many people were becoming believers.

He was a team player. He worked really well with other people. That was encouragement. He worked with Paul. He worked with John Mark. He worked with the leaders in Antioch of the church.

[9 : 38] We learn in verse 25 that he saw out Saul to take him back to Jerusalem and to take him – sorry, to Antioch – to be a teacher, to be a leader, because he saw his gifts and he wanted to encourage him and mentor him as a leader.

And interestingly, in terms of encouragement, he was also willing to take the backseat as a leader. There's a little, very interesting little change of language as we go through the story of Barnabas and Paul because it always starts in the early stages.

Barnabas and Paul and they go to Antioch and they go on their first missionary journey and it's Barnabas and it's Paul. But as time progresses, we see that changing and the language becomes Paul and Barnabas.

Now, it's maybe fairly insignificant, but it seems to be that Barnabas was willing to be that kind of leader that brought on young leaders and was then willing to recognize their gifts and give them that place of significance.

He realized that Paul was set apart for this marvelous ministry and he was willing, in a sense, to become the support man to him.

[10 : 52] So he was someone who by his life, exemplified great encouragement within the church family. And in Acts 11 where we read in verse 24, we're told that he was spirit-filled.

And that really is what I want to focus on in terms of the key to his being an encouraging Christian was that he was spirit-filled. Verse 24, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

It's a good... Why? Wouldn't that be a good thing to put in our gravestones? Good man, good woman, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

And he understood... he was in relationship with Christ. He understood prayer and dependence on God. He was clearly wise and exercised spiritually in that relationship with Jesus.

And it was attractive and it molded his character. And this, therefore, is the key to understanding the encouragement that's spoken of in the Bible because Christ was his encouragement.

[12 : 03] It was Christ that encouraged him, enabled him to see others in the light that he was able to see them in. And it was because of Christ's grace in his life and the forgiveness of Christ that enabled him to forgive others and be an encouragement.

It was Christ's patience with him that enabled him to be patient with others. And it was this ongoing recognition of an encouraging spiritual relationship with Christ that enabled... that was the motivation for him to be an encouragement to others.

He was a central leader in the early church. If you read these Middle Chapters in Acts, you'll see his name coming up again and again. He's a powerful evangelist. He shared the gospel and it was greatly blessed.

He was a teacher, he was an apostolic leader to the Gentiles. He was set apart for the first missionary journey. He was a church planter. He encouraged new Christians to stay true to the Lord, as we see in this passage here in verse 23.

And all that came from his own relationship with Jesus Christ that he was spirit-filled and knew the righteousness and goodness of Christ transforming his life.

[13 : 19] Now, lest that seems a bit unrealistic for us, we also recognize that it wasn't all plain sailing for him.

It wasn't all just a bed of encouraging roses for him to live in. He wasn't perfect. He wasn't part of a perfect church, neither we, nor all part of a perfect and easy world to be an encourager.

But we're reminded that it's this gift of grace is not an unattainable giant because Barnabas was just an ordinary person like we are.

But there was times where he stumbled and he failed to be an encouragement. There was an argument at one point with the legalists, the Jewish legalists who had become Christians who wanted the Gentiles should become Christians to fulfill all the law of Moses as well.

And he sided with these legalists as we're told in Galatians 2.13. And the other Jews were told, joined him, that is James, in his hypocrisy.

[14 : 30] So that by their... You know, it's mentioned here. And I think it's mentioned because it was so unremarkable and unexpected, it says, and so that by their hypocrisy, even Barnabas was led astray.

Even Barnabas, can you imagine Barnabas being led astray by these legalists? This grace filled encourager, he was led astray. And it's mentioned specifically.

He sided with James's men and with Peter. And Paul, his mentee, roasted them.

And he was humble enough and gracious enough to learn from that. And clearly he learned from that. And he was rebuked by that. And as later he and Paul were sent to Jerusalem, he defended the church and defended the Gentile Christians.

And we see in Barnabas's life, therefore, that forgiveness was wrought in the fires of failure. Oh, we can appreciate that, I hope. I hope we can see that in our own lives.

[15 : 34] Surely the greatest encouragers are those who recognize the most they've been forgiven.

But he also not only did he have this strange siding with the legalists, which was a point of sorrow for him and regret.

He also had a huge disagreement with Paul. His mentee, his disciple, as it were, the one that he had been so patient and generous with in bringing to maturity.

We're told in Acts 15:39 that they had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. This was over whether to take John Mark with them on the missionary journey.

This took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. Barnabas said, no way, Paul.

[16 : 39] No way. I'm taking John Mark with me. And I'm going off this way. You can go your own way. A deep, deep disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. And we don't know, we're not told exactly, or we don't know his motive behind that disagreement.

Maybe it was, maybe he did struggle a little bit with Paul's dominance, with Paul's character, with his attitude. Maybe Paul was a bit bossy and Barnabas maybe felt, well, listen here, I'm the one that's brought you along.

I'm your spiritual father here. Maybe it was more positive that he was just keen to give John Mark a second chance because we know he was an encourager.

But remember also, John Mark was his cousin, we're told that in the Colossians chapter 4. So maybe he was a bit biased in his dealings with John Mark because he had this familial blood relationship with him.

Anyway, whatever it was, they agreed to disagree, or maybe they didn't agree to disagree, maybe they just disagreed. And they went their separate way. Thankfully God used even their division to be a blessing as they went out with the gospel to different places.

[17 : 52] But it's not always easy, is it, to work with others? It's not always easy to be an encourager. It's not always easy to do the right thing.

And Barnabas is an example and a reminder to us of that. So just before we close, just let's look briefly and more broadly at that gift of encouragement for ourselves.

Going from Barnabas in our lives, something that needs to be nurtured intentionally in our lives, because we're not, I don't think, we're not naturally glorifying God by being encouragers in our lives.

It may be something you're not bad at, it might be latent in you, it might be something that is a spiritual gift, it may be something very special to you, or something that is general for all of us.

But we can all look at being better, encouraging one another in the Christian faith. And what's significant is where it's rooted.

[18 : 56] It needs to be rooted as it was with Barnabas in grace and truth. We see that, we're full of the Holy Spirit and faith. Grounded in the truth of the gospel, that is what's tremendously important.

That's the question you must ask yourself. And I must ask myself today. Not our natural gifts and abilities, however significant and good they are to have, but is our life rooted and grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ and in our relationship with Him, and are we full of the Holy Spirit by that great gift of salvation in Him?

Are we grounded in Jesus Christ so that encouragement for us is not just a natural characteristic, which of course it can be. But in Christ it has a deeper hue.

It has a deeper three-dimensional aspect that brings in servanthood and the glory of God as our motivation to do it.

We're to mimic Christ. Can I ask the leaders among us here? Might be leaders in the workplace, might be leaders in the church, might be elders or deacons, might be leaders in the home, whatever it is.

[20 : 12] Do you mimic Christ's style of leadership? Being a servant leader, an encourager, a builder up of those in the faith.

Not lording over people, not being discouraging by your words, by your attitudes, by our thoughts. You know, we have this great call to unity which glorifies God, and encouragement is a great glue to that unity because it's a humbling reality reflecting Christ.

You know, the road for us all is really steep. The battles are real for us in the Christian life. We need endurance. We're all amateurs at this.

Christ is the only one who is the great expert. We're all amateurs in the Christian life, and we need to be encouraged. It's easy to knock down. There are so many tears.

There are so many setbacks. We don't need more from one another, from our words, from our attitudes, from our distance, from our selfishness or whatever it might be.

[21 : 24] The Christian life is like a marathon. It needs endurance. And we have great promises from God, great power from God, great friendship.

But we should be on this Christian walk shoulder to shoulder. If you've ever seen a marathon, there'll be various times where people hit the wall, and what they need at that time is encouragement.

They need someone to come alongside them. They need someone to help them. They need re-energized. And that's what the Christian life often... How do you feel that at the end of the year?

Maybe at the end of the year is a difficult time for you as a Christian. You feel discouraged at the lack of growth in your life over the last year, or the battles and the struggles.

When you look back a year, you actually think you've regressed in your faith. You've grown further away from Jesus than closer. Your prayer life has ceased to be. You've harlever read your Bible.

[22 : 22] Maybe lots of things that discourage you. That's when we need to reroute ourselves in the gospel and in Jesus Christ and be encouraged by those around you.

And so not only do you need encouragement, as Christians we need to give encouragement. We need to know that the battle is hard for the people around us. And we need to be the ones that build them up, not knock them down.

So rooted in grace and truth. It's also rooted in generosity. Isn't that what we see with Barnabas? With the generous resources that we've been given in the Holy Spirit in our lives.

I think discouragement is often married to... What do you think it's married to? Meanness. Discouragement is often married to meanness.

We're tight with our time. We're tight with our money. We're tight with our gifts. We're tight with our inner relationships because we fail to see what God has poured out into our hearts. We're mean spirited to...

[23 : 29] Discouragement is usually mean spirited towards others, isn't it? That's what discouragement is. So that discouragement is often married to meanness.

So significant that we recognize a generosity of spirit. Because discouragement is often a way of making ourselves more important and ourselves more significant than other people.

And encouragement is quite the opposite. So when it's rooted in grace and truth, it reveals itself in generosity, which comes from a heart that is self-forgetful.

And we see that in Barnabas, don't we? That generosity rooted in grace and truth, that self-forgetfulness. And we see the importance of that in the Christian church, the willingness to invest in other people, to spend time with them, to spend time with one another, to worship together, to pray together, to learn from one another, to grow in the Christian life together.

Again, I appeal to those who are older in the faith, not necessarily in age, but those who are mature in the faith have been Christians for a long time. What a great privilege you have to share your faith, the wealth of experience that you've had as a Christian.

[24 : 54] The failings like Barnabas, it's not... We're not saying that, you know, you're going to people and say, hey, watch me, I'm the great Christian. But you're like Barnabas who made some great whopping mistakes that have been recorded in Scripture for all of time.

Thank God that that's not the case for all of us, isn't it? And take our mistakes and take our experiences of God's long suffering and His grace and His forgiveness and share that with others that we nurture one another and that we encourage one another and that we build one another up.

And so doing, we are self-forgetful. And we recognize in that way that our spiritual relationships are very important, that peer to peer encouragement is important.

Young Christians, encouraging other young Christians, sharing experiences, sharing answered prayers, talking about our faith, learning to do that so that it becomes easier, obviously to talk about our faith with those who are unbelievers.

So that it's not in the Christian church or in St. Columbus that we're just matesy mates, that we're just all good pals together and it's great, it's a great church. Yeah, we all love each other.

[26 : 12] Not just that we're friends in that way, which is important, certainly, but that we're spiritual friends as well, that we're more than just mates that we're in spiritual encouragers, that we share our failings and our struggles and we look to one another for support and for prayer and for help.

What's the greatest thing you can ever do? What's the greatest thing we can ever do for anyone? Just pray for them. And it's to tell them that we pray for them and that we encourage them in that, recognizing the value and the benefit of that in their lives.

And self-forgetful as we share the gospel with others. Ask yourself what is it that stops you sharing the gospel? What is it that stops me sharing the gospel?

Are my people pleaser, scared of being rejected, not sure what to say, lots of reasons that all revolve around me.

And that's often the case with us, isn't it? But let's be those who are encouraged to share our faith in Jesus Christ because we've been encouraged by Jesus Christ.

[27 : 24] I think that's a great thing to remember that we are sharing a relationship that has been a huge encouragement in our lives, much more than just an encouragement.

It's redemption, it's eternal life. And we can share that knowing that God will bless what we seek to do.

So I want us as we go into the new year to remember that particular gift and challenge in our lives. And I was looking over my notes this morning and there was a mistype, a typing mistake at the end of my notes.

And I was wanting to encourage you all to soar on wings like eagles. So what I typed was sour on wings.

So but I thought, well, I think I'll mention that because you don't want to be a sour-faced Christian this year, next year, tomorrow.

[28 : 33] Discouragement is sour-faced, sad-faced. It doesn't help anyone. And we're often discouraged ourselves. And in a sense, the best way to come out of that is to re-root ourselves in Jesus Christ and see how we can be encouragers to others.

But let's not be sour Christians. There's enough sourness in the world as they're not. Let's not be sour Christians. But as we bed our hearts and lives in Christ, let us soar on wings like eagles in the current of His grace and then fall on our knees and pray for change.

The greatest thing St. Columbus can be this year in many ways is a community of grace filled encouragers. And that's, I'm sure, what you need from your fellow Christians, certainly what I need from my fellow Christians, and what we can offer to one another.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Father, help us to learn this great grace. Help us to pray for it.

Help us to see how encouraging you are in our lives. You don't walk away. You don't turn your back. You don't fail to forgive.

[29 : 59] You don't hold our sins against us when we confess them. You make promises never to leave us, never to forsake us. You don't discourage.

You're honest. You tell the truth. But not to discourage, but to turn us from darkness to light. You're the ultimate, you're the greatest example of encouragement by your life and by your death and resurrection and ascension.

We have great hope. We have an amazing future in Christ. We have many reasons to be encouraged today as believers. May we take that experience and knowledge spiritually and may it mold and perspectivise and be what we are as Christians to one another, especially to one another, in our homes as dads, as mums, as parents, as children, as brothers and sisters, as individuals, in our workplace as colleagues, as students, as school friends.

May we be the sons and daughters of encouragement that you want us to be. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.