**Barnabas – the son of encouragement**

Text: Acts 15:36-41

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**Scriptures:** Joshua 1:1-9; Acts 4:32-36; 11:19-24; 15:36-41; 2 Timothy 4:9-18

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 211, 184, 73b, 502, 439, 525

**Series:** Occasional (Church Camp)

**Theme:** The effective ministry of encouragement exemplified by Barnabas

**Proposition:** Like Barnabas, be an encourager of others and point them to Christ

**Introduction**

The Christian life is like a climb. The Apostle Paul put it this way “*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 3:14). We can help others in their heavenly call to follow Christ through the ministry of encouragement – ‘walking alongside each other’.

God spoke words of encouragement to His servant Joshua before the conquest of the Promised Land saying: “*Just as I was with Moses, so* ***I will be with you****. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them*” (Josh 1:5-6). The Lord God would remain with Joshua so he did not need to be dismayed or discouraged (v9).

Later in history, Jesus literally walked with His disciples on this earth, teaching, guiding, comforting and encouraging them. Just before He left them to go to the cross He explained: “*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33). After His resurrection and before He ascended into heaven Jesus said to His disciples: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold,* ***I am with you always****, to the end of the age*." (Matt 28:18-20). Jesus promised to be with His disciples, sending the Holy Spirit to be their/our helper/comforter/encourager.

God’s will is that disciples of Jesus make other disciples by loving others as they have been loved by Him. Jesus said “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:34-35). We can see what loving one another involves from the many ‘one another’ commands in Scripture:

* Bear one another's burdens
* Be kind to one another
* Accept one another
* Submit to one another
* Bear with and forgive one another
* Show hospitality to one another
* Teach and admonish one another
* Have the same care for one another
* Be at peace with one another
* Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another
* Genuinely love one another
* Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another
* Encourage one another

Paul writes to the Thessalonians Christians: “*God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore* ***encourage one another*** *and build one another up, just as you are doing*” (1 Thess 5:9-11). Barnabas was someone who encouraged others, this morning we are going to look at his effective ministry under three headings:

1. Barnabas – a good man
2. Barnabas – in conflict
3. Barnabas – an influencer
4. **Barnabas – a good man**

We first ‘meet’ Barnabas at the end of Acts chapter 4, where Luke records that his name was originally ‘Joseph’ (Acts 4:36). It was the apostles who gave him the name ‘Barnabas’. The meaning of this name is revealed in Scripture as ‘Son of Encouragement’. The Greek word used can be translated ‘encouragement’, ‘consolation’, or ‘comfort’. It has the literal meaning of ‘calling another person alongside’. It was used in the ancient world of a soldier who would come alongside another warrior to help them by telling them to ‘fight on and finish the battle’. To ‘encourage’ conveys the main idea of urging another person to take action. It includes comforting someone but always with the aim that they would be better equipped to meet some difficult situation with confidence and courage.

Barnabas was a Levite, a member of the tribe of Levi – the only tribe that supported Moses against the others who worshipped the golden calf (Ex 32:25-29; Deut 10:6-9). The Levites were consecrated to the Lord’s service, performing duties in the tabernacle and then the temple. They assisted the priests, maintaining the holiness of the temple. The Levites were not given a tribal inheritance in the Promised Land but were supported by the tithe of the rest of the nation (Num 18:24-32).

Luke records in Acts 4:37 that Barnabas sold a field and brought the proceeds to the apostles to be shared amongst those in need. We do not know how he came to own land, as Levites had no land inheritance in Israel. It is possible that this regulation did not apply to his home in Cyprus, or that it may have been his wife’s property before they married. The generous servant heart of Barnabas is certainly clear. He was a giver. Later, Barnabas worked in order to support himself in Christian ministry (1 Cor 9:6).

It was Barnabas who took the man who was called Saul, after his dramatic conversion experience on the Damascus Road and brought him to the apostles (Acts 9:27). Barnabas was willing to testify to the genuineness of Paul’s faith, even though the church would have no doubt been very sceptical at first, given Paul’s violent opposition before he came to Christ. Today people who are ‘on the outside’ of congregational life often need encouragement to become relationally connected to the church. Without this, many stay for a while, but then leave. Humanly speaking, if it had not been for the encouragement of Barnabas, Paul, who had been a persecutor of Christians, might never have been accepted into the early church.

In Acts chapter 11 we read of the spread of the gospel to Antioch where many Greek speakers, including Gentiles (non-Jews) ‘*believed and turned to the Lord*’ (v21). The church in Jerusalem then sent Barnabas who was glad to see evidence of the grace of God at work in Antioch – which was the third largest city in the Roman Empire at that time (after Rome and Alexandria).

So what did Barnabas do there? True to his name he ‘*exhorted them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts*’ (v23). The Greek word ‘exhorted’ (is the one translated elsewhere as ‘encouraged’). Barnabas ‘walked’ alongside the new believers and called them to wholeheartedly keep following Jesus. He is highly commended in Scripture with these words in verse 24: “*he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*”. The character and ministry of Barnabas is therefore a very good example for you and me to strive towards.

Barnabas was very much an imitator of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11:1). Jesus is a ‘good man’- morally perfect (unlike Barnabas, you and me). When Jesus was baptised, the Spirit of God descended on Him like a dove (Matt 3:16). The goodness, faithfulness and holiness of Jesus was confirmed by His Heavenly Father who said “*This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased*” (Matt 3:14). A central part of the public ministry of Jesus on this earth was that He encouraged His disciples. He literally ‘walked alongside them’ for about three years.

* He taught them, revealing both His identity and His mission.
* He prepared them for what they would face in the future.
* He comforted them (e.g. John 16:33b).
* He was patient and forgiving with them.

We also see Jesus, the Encourager, on the road to Emmaus, after His resurrection. There two discouraged, despondent men were walking. They had hoped that Jesus would be the one who would redeem Israel (Luke 24:21), but they knew He had been crucified and that His tomb had been found empty. As Jesus walked alongside them, He explained how the Old Testament Scriptures all pointed to His person and work. Luke records “*and beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself*” (v27). Then He shared a meal with them and revealed Himself to them.

Barnabas was not a perfect man like Jesus, as we’ll see in our next point, but he was a good man, an encourager like Jesus. He is a good example for you and me to model our lives and ministry to others. However, the life of an encourager is not always easy, as we’ll see from our next point:

1. **Barnabas – in conflict**

The Bible is a book of truth, presenting the events of the past as they actually took place. The weaknesses, failures and struggles of real people are revealed for our instruction (ref. 1 Cor 10:11). After the resurrection and ascension of Christ, some men came from Judea to Antioch and were teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation (15:1). Luke records that ‘*this brought them (Paul and Barnabas) into no small dissension and debate with them*’ (15:2). As a result, Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers to go to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about the question of circumcision for Gentile believers. It is very clear that by this stage both Paul and Barnabas were prominent leaders in the early church, Luke records that “*all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles*” (Acts 15:12).

In Acts 15:36-41 we read of a conflict between Paul and Barnabas sometime after the decision of the ‘Jerusalem Council’ not to burden Gentile believers beyond abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality (Acts 15:29). Both Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and Paul (Gal 1:1) were apostles, although neither had been one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Paul was keen to revisit some of the towns on the first missionary journey that he undertook together with Barnabas (Acts 13:2-14:28). They had been close colleagues in ministry together. Now though, they had what Luke describes as a ‘*sharp disagreement*’ (Acts 15:39). This was an altercation between two ‘ministers’ of the gospel.

We don’t know all that was said, but we do know what their intense division was about. Luke records that “*Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work*” (v37-38). Barnabas wanted to ‘walk alongside’ Mark on this second missionary journey, but Paul had such strong reservations about Mark that he disagreed and did not think it wise to take Mark. We know that on the first missionary journey Mark had left Paul and Barnabas to return to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). We don’t know why Mark did not continue, but went back home. Some theories have been suggested including homesickness, a change of leadership from Barnabas (who was a cousin of Mark’s, Col 4:10), or an illness of Paul’s. Whilst we don’t know why Mark left, we do know that Paul was not happy about it and saw Mark as something of an unreliable deserter.

Clearly Paul and Barnabas could not reach agreement about whether or not to take Mark with them, so they literally went separate ways. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia. This is an encouraging passage of Scripture; not because it promotes disagreements, but because the Lord uses even sharp differences for the good of the broader church. There were now two teams of missionaries where before there had been one! However, this is not to be taken as commending disputes! Brothers and sisters, we should always ‘*if possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*’ people (Rom 12:18).

There was another conflict that Barnabas was involved in. Peter came to Antioch and was opposed by Paul because ‘*he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party*’ (Gal 2:12). In writing to the Galatians, Paul records that at this time “*And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy*” (Gal 2:13). Barnabas, the good man, the encourager, made a mistake.

Sometimes people like us hold back from ‘walking alongside others’ because we are afraid of making a mistake, of saying the wrong thing, perhaps of exposing some of our own weaknesses to someone else. Even Barnabas, the commendable Son of Encouragement, made at least one mistake, yet he was greatly used by the Lord and is highly commended in Scripture. So be encouraged to be an encourager like Barnabas! Don’t allow fear of ‘making a mistake’ hold you back. You and I, like him can be gospel influencers, which brings us to our third point:

1. **Barnabas – an influencer**

The term ‘influencer’ has become common on the Internet. A social media influencer is ‘*someone who has established credibility in a specific industry, has access to a huge audience and can persuade others to act based on their recommendations*’. Internet influencers often have dubious integrity and promote dubious products. However a simple definition of an influencer is ‘a person who influences others’.

Barnabas was an influencer who influenced others by ‘walking alongside them’ and encouraging them. He was a man of integrity who influenced others to follow Christ. We have already seen how Barnabas took Mark with him on a missionary journey despite Paul’s serious reservations about Mark’s suitability for ministry. How did that actually go? Very well. Through Barnabas’s encouragement, Mark grew in maturity. When Paul, in prison and nearing the end of his life, wrote a second letter to Timothy he said, “*Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry*” (2 Tim 4:11). Paul was perhaps wrong about Mark earlier, Barnabas was right. Mark just needed encouragement to grow in the Lord.

Humanly speaking, we might not have the gospel of Mark if it had not been for the encouragement of Barnabas. Humanly speaking, we might not have the many New Testament epistles written by Paul were it not for the encouragement of Barnabas in bringing Saul, who had been ‘*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*’ (Acts 9:1) into the church.

Through God’s living Word, Barnabas is still influencing people today. He influences people like you and me who see, through the revelation of Scripture, the way in which he was greatly used by the Lord as an encourager. Today as we hear the Word of God preached, if our ears and hearts are open, we will be influenced by the Holy Spirit. He is called, in Greek the ‘Parakletos’. His name is closely related to the word for encouragement ‘parakaleo’ – to call alongside. The Holy Spirit’s name is translated as ‘Helper’, ‘Comforter’ or ‘Counsellor’ (John 14:16). We could legitimately also translate His name as ‘Encourager’. The Holy Spirit’s role is:

* ‘*to teach us all things and to remind us of what Jesus has said*’ (John 14:26).
* ‘*to convict …in regard to sin and righteousness*’ (John 16:8).
* ‘*to guide us in all truth*’ (John 16:13).
* ‘*to speak only what he hears from Jesus and to tell us what is to come*’ (John 16:13).
* ‘*to bring glory to Christ*’ (John 16:14).

Brothers and sisters, you and I are not the Holy Spirit, however, by God’s grace, like Barnabas we are ‘*full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*’ (Acts 11:24). What does being ‘full of the Holy Spirit’ mean? Ephesians 5:18 provides us with understanding: “*Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit*”. Instead of being intoxicated by alcohol otherwise called ‘being under the influence’, be under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Be controlled, influenced, guided and empowered by Him. Now we have a clearer picture of what being an influencer like Barnabas includes.

**Firstly**, calling others to come alongside us and walking with them.

**Secondly**, as we share our lives together with another person, we:

* Teach what we know about Jesus and what He has said.
* We provide accountability for others to help them recognise where they need to repent and where they are ‘on track’ in following the Lord.
* We guide others in the pathway that leads to life in Christ.
* We are careful to provide counsel and wisdom that is grounded in Scripture.
* We seek always to point others to Jesus and give glory to Him.

**Thirdly**, we do not allow fear of conflict or failure to prevent us from encouraging others because we know that the Lord is pleased to use our less-than-perfect ministry for good, as he did that of Barnabas.

Have you been encouraged by this sermon? Perhaps you have received affirmation that what you have already been doing by ‘walking alongside others’ is the Lord’s revealed will. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Thessalonians: *“encourage one another and build one another up,* ***just as you are doing****” (1 Thess 5:11).*

Perhaps you are looking for opportunities to encourage others? Perhaps you long to be encouraged by someone else? At times we may be tempted to avoid ‘walking alongside each other’ in a ministry of encouragement. We may fear saying the wrong thing. We may fear being wounded, rejected or hurt. We may not think that the Lord, through us, can make any difference in the lives of others.

Perhaps you have been convicted that you have been neglecting this ministry of encouragement that is the Lord’s calling upon the lives of all His people? Perhaps you need to repent of your negligence in this area of your living for Jesus? As we acknowledge our sin to the Lord, Jesus ‘comes alongside us’. He is able to sympathise with our weaknesses because He is a human being – one who has been tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15).

Let me encourage you to strive to be an encourager like Barnabas who was Christlike in his ministry. There are many opportunities to ‘walk alongside’ others in our congregational life together as we continue on the upward climb looking forward to the day when we will arrive at our final destination – the glorious New Heavens and New Earth.

AMEN.