

“Acts of the Holy Spirit – Part 5: The Enterprise of Encouragement”

Acts 11:19-30

In this passage from chapter 11, Luke reports another significant step in the progress of the gospel to the ends of the earth. And, *as he does so*, I want you to notice he lets us observe **a key to vibrant community life that enables the Church to flourish!** This key I want to focus on is that of **encouragement** ... Luke clearly intends to present the qualities of Barnabas as an encourager ... In chapter 4, Luke made the point that this Christian was given his new name, which means “son of encouragement.” The *Apostles* gave him this name ... Barnabas.

Luke not only records *how* Barnabas encouraged the young church at Antioch ... he also gives the character traits that enabled this man to be such an effective encourager ... these are the things we’re called to emulate. It says in v. 23 that he was glad when he “*saw evidence of the grace of God*” ... Put yourself in his situation. As a Jew, he would have been confronted with significant cultural differences with the Gentiles. He must have seen and heard many things that would have shocked some people. But he *did not focus attention* on these! Instead, he focused on evidence of God’s grace among them, and that made him glad ... Biblical **encouragers are easily gladdened!**

Let me tell you why these kind of people are becoming more and more rare ... It’s because more and more people see a new work and immediately compare it with their *own* work. This makes them feel threatened about their status ... *so*, they’ll look at the shortcomings in someone else’s work (and there will *always* be shortcomings). Focusing on those things, they end up criticizing the work. Such criticism may even be valid, BUT it is ill-timed and done in the wrong spirit. Such people are an *anti-Barnabas* ... They are *de-couragers* – if there was such a word.

They alienate themselves from new people with new ideas, from the enthusiastic, sometimes immature leaders. But by doing so, they forfeit their chance to influence them towards maturity! There's an *analogy* using vultures and hummingbirds ... Both the hummingbird and the vulture fly over the desert. All vultures see is rotting meat, because that is what they look for. They thrive on that diet. But hummingbirds don't focus on the dead. Instead, they look for the colorful blossoms of desert plants ... The vultures live on what was. They live on the past. They fill themselves with what is dead and gone. But hummingbirds live on what is. They seek new life. And they fill themselves with freshness & life. The point is: each bird finds what it is looking for ... And so do we! [P]

There are many young, enthusiastic Christians, like the Gentiles in Acts 11, who have joined churches with a sincere desire to serve! They may be lacking in experience, but they're not lacking in zeal ... and we need that! Barnabas realized that ... There is so much potential in these "new people" – who in some cases, really *aren't* that new. And this potential, in people who have so much to offer, is lost from the church if they receive only criticism! Some give up trying and remain uninvolved. Others go elsewhere to serve. And the rest are disappointed/disillusioned/embittered ... But wise encouragers *see the good* in the new movement, are pleased with it, and help it to grow and thrive. Way too many churches are *losing the promise* hidden in new movements, because they don't have enough encouragers to support it ... and *share their gladness!*

Next, Barnabas' encouragement is made concrete in how he promoted **perseverance** in their relationship with Jesus – what the end of verse 23 means by "*staying true to the Lord with all their hearts.*" Here, he shows us that glad-hearted encouragement is an *active* ministry, not just a passive acceptance of people. By their speech & their life, encouragers urge others to *go on* in the life of faith without giving up!

Young Christians (*and I don't mean young in age, but in faith*), young Christians can cool off in their enthusiasm and commitment once the initial excitement of the new life wears off, and they face disappointments. This is when mature leaders are needed – and not simply, “Suck it up buttercup” leaders, okay? I’m talking about Christians who have weathered storms and are not surprised by problems. *Because* they have faith to handle crises, they can give stability to less experienced believers. This is one reason why we should have seasoned Christians involved in new endeavors and ministries – to help people *persevere!*

It’s often a temptation for churches, for long-time members in particular, to take people who are new and enthusiastic and send them to minister in difficult areas – either things we don’t want to do anymore or things we don’t know *how* to do. In any case, this is a recipe for failure – because in a crisis or a time of discouragement, they feel *alone*. They may make rash decisions, or *big* mistakes – all of which could be avoided if seasoned members would work with them.

Encouragers have a calling to help people abide in Christ wholeheartedly – to “stay true” as it says in v. 23. This involves a couple different things: it involves *teaching* – which Barnabas and Paul did for a whole year in Antioch ... It involves *being with* people and urging them to persevere when they are in a challenging situation, and may be tempted to compromise or give up.

Heath Fernando shares a story to express this kind of ministry: “A preacher’s son was running a race, and the father was watching the race near the final bend before the home stretch. When the son came to that spot, he was not in the lead. The father cried out as loud as he could, ‘*Go!*’ The son recognized the father’s voice, and this cry created a

new determination, which helped him increase his speed and stamina, and win the race ... We can be a shot in the arm to the faith & life of many people. When they are discouraged, we can help lift them up through words of encouragement. When they are committed, we can help them go deeper in their commitment.”

Third, in this story from the Acts of the Holy Spirit, we can see various *qualities* that mark biblical encouragers, and they’re summarized in Barnabas in verse 24: “*He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and strong in faith.*” [P] So, encouragers are people of character – spurring others on to be godly. In the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, this is the one called “**goodness.**”

So when right on the heels of this, he says Barnabas was “**full of the Holy Spirit**” – it makes sense in light of the fruit seen in his life. On top of that, by what name does Jesus call the Advocate that he promised to send his disciples in the Gospel of John? He calls the Spirit the Paraclete, which means Counselor or *Encourager*. So, this “goodness” is more than simply doing good things. It carries with it the idea of serving others. Those who have the goodness of the Spirit do not crush others in order to climb in society or manipulate situations to their own ends. Such individuals are *empty* of the Spirit ...

So, in Barnabas, we see that encouragers display *goodness* ... they demonstrate Holy Spirit *indwelling* ... and finally, they display **faith**. Luke ends by saying Barnabas was “*strong in faith.*” By the way, both faith in *God* and faith in *people* are important for the ministry of encouragement, because to encourage people you must believe in them ... which is not easy to do sometimes. If we become disappointed in people, we are tempted to refrain from trusting anybody. But *it is our faith in God that helps us believe in people!*

Ultimately, and this is important, we put our belief and trust not so much in people as in the promises of God – in the possibilities of grace in the lives of people! ... This is what Barnabas did. Faith in God's provision gave Barnabas courage to sell his land and give the proceeds to meet the needs of the poor (4:37). Faith in God's ability to change people gave him the courage to risk supporting Saul when the others were afraid of him (9:26). Here in chapter 11, it is faith in the possibilities of grace that enables Barnabas to look *beyond* the weaknesses he saw ... to focus on what God had done, and *could* do, in the life of the church in Antioch ...

Let me put a little more flesh on this kind of faith. Barnabas took a trip of about a *hundred miles* to recruit Paul to help him in his work – we kind of miss the significance of that in the simple phrase: "*Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul.*" This wasn't like driving to Charleston to pick up a coworker. He had to be highly motivated to do this! So why do it? [P] Barnabas realized that the task was so big that he needed capable help. And Paul was possibly more talented, and *probably* more educated than he was... Do you see the humility in this action? By recruiting Paul, he was actually jeopardizing his own position of leadership and prominence. But encouragers know that there are some things that others can do better than themselves, and they encourage such people to use their gifts within the context of their own ministries, even if that means they'll be outshone.

This vision of grace helps us see beyond the gloom, to have faith, and so to strive to be agents of grace in the lives of others... We will not give up on people. We will pray for them and meet with them. We will urge them and correct in love. And we will do so believing that God can and will make them, and us, into His mighty instruments!

So, to be sons and daughters of encouragement, we are called (1) to be more easily **gladdened** & share our gladness instead of looking for things to naysay... (2) to promote **perseverance** in Christian growth... and (3) to do all this, we must display the **qualities** of *goodness, Spirit-indwelling, and faith* – in God and others. There are lots of things we can do in the church without these things ... but without them, we can't help people *abide in the Lord*. To produce people who walk close to God, we *too* must walk close to God. So, in this way, let's be sons and daughters of encouragement. Amen.