

# Be An Encourager-Like Barnabas

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Pastor Chip Fisher

Acts 4:32,36-37; 9:26-30; 11:19-26; 15:36-39

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How many of you remember receiving too much encouragement when you were a child—your parents telling you to often, “You can do this!” “I know you can do it!” “I believe in you!” “I appreciate all you do!”

I’m afraid mostly you probably remember, “You should do this!” “I wish I could believe in you!” “If you would do more, I might appreciate you.” Very few of us enter into adulthood with too much confidence.

Most of us probably didn’t get too much encouragement as a child—but how about today? How many of you receive too much encouragement these days? How many of you never feel self-doubt, or maybe even burned out, or wonder whether anyone truly notices and appreciates the efforts and sacrifices you make and the work you do?

Maybe you can appreciate the truth of this legend: God decided to take out of Satan’s bag of nasty tricks every strategy but one. Satan got to choose which one thing to keep. He chose, as his most valuable, the power of discouragement. “If only I can persuade Christians to be thoroughly discouraged, they will make no further effort and they will never again be any threat to me.”

On the other hand, one of the most successful college football coaches is reported to have gone to an incoming freshman and told him privately, “I am very impressed with your talent. If you give it your best shot and work your hardest, I believe you’re good enough to make it to the NFL.” In fact this coach is reported to privately tell every freshman on his team this same thing—and he has the highest percentage of players in the NFL of any coach.

For us to feel discouraged is natural, but it is also a telling symptom of our being separated from God. It’s impossible for us to be abiding in Christ and be cut off from Him. It’s impossible for us to be dining on the Bread of Heaven and drinking from the spring of Living Water and remain hungry and thirsty and empty, discouraged. It’s impossible, but at times I have managed to pull it off. Maybe you have, too.

Maybe because discouragement is such a deep problem, I am all the more grateful for the many ways you have shown your appreciation for the work Heather and I do. One of you is a world class encourager. Every single Sunday I preach one of you comes to the back of the church, a smile on your face, and a sincere, “thank

you for reminding me of this..., or “I so appreciate the way you said that...” (Since you find a sincere, positive compliment to pay me, it’s not merely flattery—though it is a commitment you have made.) One of you regularly sends me the most complimentary, heartfelt letters—specifying in detail why you are so glad that God called my family here and me to serve as your pastor. Wow! How great does that make me feel, and motivate me to do my best! Two of you will drop anything you are doing, day or night, and hurry down to help with computer or technical problems. Others of you came to me privately once I became the only paid pastor on the staff, saying something like, “I know there’s going to be a transition to come—but I want you to know I am with you, I know our church will be fine and you’ll do fine, and I will do anything you ask of me. I’m not going anywhere except forward with you and this church.”

I Many of you in this church are terrific encouragers, and in this you follow Barnabas. We heard several readings this morning describing that great encourager in the early church: Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus. He was so good at being an encourager they changed his name to “Barnabas” (“son of encouragement” or “the encourager”).

The first we hear [ch 4] of Barnabas he’s selling a field and bringing all of its proceeds and laying the money at the feet of the apostles. He gave his offering to the church wholeheartedly. That was a huge encouragement.

How many of you were present for our Annual Meeting last Monday? It would have been hard to come away much more encouraged! Partly because the dinner was so beautifully prepared and served. Partly because so many of you are serving the church in one capacity or other, or several. But another huge encouragement is the fact that we wound up last year seriously ahead of budget! (We all know it’s not about the money—but still it’s encouraging when like Barnabas we bring our treasure, in faith, and share our tithe and our finances. Everyone wants to be part of a church with generous, trusting people committed wholeheartedly to God; where I may be part of a movement of God much greater than I can achieve on my own.)

It’s no coincidence the first we learn of this great encourager, Barnabas, is that he is financially trusting. He’s “all in”; he is bound to follow Jesus wherever it takes him—he has moved from Cyprus to Jerusalem, and he’s

not turning back. He's not holding back.

His finances are symptomatic of his heart and his feet. It's the same today; why do we so appreciate people who encourage us, and feel so grateful to be in a church full of encouragers—yet sometimes we ourselves fail to encourage others? Why do we fail to offer others a gift which is easily within our capability? (Every single one of us can be an encourager, one way or another. Tommy was a special needs student in his elementary school. One day his mom noticed a huge smile on his face as she picked him up. "What is it Tommy? I can tell something wonderful happened today." "Mom, you wouldn't believe it—I got the best part of all in the school play!" "You did, honey. I'm so glad. That's wonderful! What part did you get? (She was more than a little curious what part her Tommy had been assigned.) "Mom, I've been chosen to clap and cheer for all the others."

Tommy had none of our excuses, our rationalizations for failing to be good encouragers to others around us. We just get too busy. We'd like to try to bring out the best in others, try to be invest ourselves in those we love, but our plates are just too full with our own activities. We'd focus on some of the emotional needs of others if we could...

Not only do we get too busy—sometimes we feel so emotionally empty ourselves we may buy into Satan's trick that we have nothing in reserve to give to others. This is a lie, of course: as we show Christ's love for others it brings us more, not less. Love is not a zero sum game, in which if we give something away it is lost to us forever. Just the opposite! Giving love, giving encouragement to others only helps us to receive more of what we need. To try to safeguard our affections, ration our love, be sure we have enough, is the perfect recipe for depression and loneliness. It's a lie. It's a remnant of Satan's one legendary trick of deceit, to try to make us believe we are emotionally generous, and focus on others, we will have nothing left over. (Maybe we'll even die!) If we buy into this lie, sure enough, eventually we will have nothing left over. (But Jesus knew otherwise: "if you try to hang onto your own life you will surely lose it, but if you will give away your life for My sake you will surely find it." [Mk 8:35] "The first will be last and the last will be first." [Mt 20:16] "Pursue first of all the Kingdom of God, and His ways, and God guarantees you will receive plenty of what you really need." [Mt 6:33]

Some of us have tried living by hoarding, by hanging on to what we feel we most need, and that attitude has gotten us into nothing but more loneliness. With that approach you can't enjoy a long-term romance or marriage; you can't enjoy being part of a fulfilling and genuine community—you can't even enjoy a meaningful

life in relationship with the God who brings us out of loneliness and separation and into the bonds of friendship and love for which we were created. Only I and my self-defeating attitudes can keep me from enjoying the sense of appreciating and being appreciated, of belonging and loving and being loved, for which God created me. Only my fear and my misunderstanding about God can keep me from the personal experience of God I long for, and for which God created me.

I'm pretty sure Barnabas didn't feel alone or depressed or far away from God.

II The next time we hear about Barnabas, "son of encouragement," he's doing more than giving his money without reservation to the church. It's chapter nine, and he's going way out on a limb for someone else. That someone else was Saul, then Paul—the crazy committed disciple of Jesus who changed the world. It would not have happened (at least not nearly the same way) had Barnabas not taken his part.

You remember the zealous Saul had first persecuted Christians, even to the point of death. The risen Christ had then overcome Saul on the road to Damascus, and Saul, Paul, had changed his mind and his life. He began now to preach in Damascus to whoever would listen that that Jesus is the Son of God after all! The only trouble is that many in Damascus were still on the team Saul was on before this conversion to Jesus business.

Paul barely escaped from Damascus with his life, being let down outside the city wall in a laundry basket after dark. Good news: he made it out alive. One problem: he came next to Jerusalem to join the disciples to help build the fledgling Church of Jesus and they didn't trust him one bit. "This is the same one who was trying to imprison us, even kill us!" "This is the one who hated Jesus and us, His disciples!" "Don't believe him—it's a trick! He's a wolf, not a lamb, and he'll always be a wolf! Don't let him back into Jerusalem!" The Christians didn't trust Paul and their opponents wanted to kill him. (And although Barnabas eventually won over the Christians, the opponents succeeded in driving Paul out of the church, out of town, back to Tarsus.)

When Paul was still radioactive, before Paul was a rock star, when everyone was betting against him and when their opponents were trying to kill him—it was Barnabas who stepped up. Barnabas took Paul's part; Barnabas put his credibility on the line. Barnabas took Paul to the leader of the new church: "Guys: you have to believe me. Paul has seen the Lord. He is different now. I have heard him risk his life in Damascus because he is now preaching boldly in the name of Jesus, His Lord. Give him a pass;

trust me on this one. Paul is with us. Paul is OK.”

It's a great irony: even the mighty Paul could not gain access to this church at Jerusalem by himself. Even the mighty Paul needed someone else to vouch for him. The more vigorously he proclaimed Jesus, the more they would mistrust him. Only Barnabas trusted him before the verdict was in. Only Barnabas went out on a limb for Paul. Paul finally gained friends and fans in the church later on—but when he couldn't buy one friend it was Barnabas who befriended him. When his preaching couldn't penetrate one closed heart in Jerusalem it was Barnabas whose heart opened to him.

Being an encourager is not the same as being a cheerleader, thought sometimes that's part of it. An encourager sees others with the perspective of Jesus, who was famous for seeing others not for what they were at the moment but for what they could become. Jesus saw others thru the lens of possibility; Jesus saw others as the Father saw them: perfect, complete, whole.

You remember Peter, who had betrayed Jesus when it counted most, when Jesus most needed at least a little moral support—a little encouragement. “Peter: will you please at least stay awake with me for one hour? You don't need to go to the cross with Me or anything like that, but your presence, your encouragement, would mean a lot to Me.” Too much to ask Peter, and then the cock crowed, and Peter denied Jesus, and how would he ever be the same? Through it all Jesus kept seeing Peter not as Simon, but as “Peter”—My “Rock”—and head of the Church. Peter gave up on Peter and Peter gave up on Jesus, but Jesus never did.

Who is there in your life who has forgotten or quit living as if they were created in the image of God? Who is in danger of giving up on themselves as one of infinite value to Jesus? Like Barnabas you may be in the unique position of being able to speak for someone, use your credibility for someone, before everyone else sees their potential. You may be able to share the perspective of Jesus and see someone around you as complete and whole and restored when they still see themselves as damaged goods. Is there a child, or a spouse, or one all alone and fighting uphill... one whom God asks you to go out on a limb for? Is there someone waiting to hear of God's forgiveness, of God's welcome, of God's invitation into something new? Are you being called to encourage him or her as Barnabas did Paul?

III Next we see Barnabas, it's in Antioch, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. After Stephen had been martyred, believers in Jerusalem have dispersed all over the place. Many of those who fled to Antioch were not

Jewish believers, however, and the church in Jerusalem didn't know what to do about them. It was a totally new challenge—“outsiders” worshiping and believing. The Holy Spirit was going crazy in Antioch. The Jerusalem church needed someone fair, someone they trusted, to go and assess what was happening. (This development in Antioch has been called “the first great crisis in Christianity.”) Barnabas was their man: “because he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith.” Maybe because he was full of the Spirit he recognized the work of the Spirit: he thought it was great what God was doing in Antioch. While he was up there checking them out, for good measure, you can bet he “encouraged” them to remain open and faithful to what God was doing among them. Even though their style of worship was different, their church culture was different, Barnabas could put aside his personal likes and dislikes to give thanks for a new thing God was doing. His “encouragement” was not limited to persons—he now encouraged an entire church.

While he was up there among so many new believers, he knew they needed a leader. He sensed the one God needed to pastor them all was Paul. Paul understood the Greek mind and heart; Paul had a great boldness and passion for God; Paul would do anything the Spirit told him to do. No price was too great to pay; Barnabas himself traveled to Tarsus to track down Paul. Barnabas went on to invite, to “encourage” Paul right out of retirement.

He found his man, alright. We don't know Paul's attitude. It would be understandable had he been bitter. “I gave my life to Jesus, and risked my life in Damascus and then Jerusalem—and I got sent home. I've been kicking around here in Tarsus where some think I'm a deserter, and a turncoat; others think I'm crazy. I've lost my family, and my inheritance. The church hasn't seen fit to use me for anything...” Paul most likely had turned back to making tents and studying the Scriptures with no chance to use his many gifts.

Paul said yes, of course. They were probably on the next boat back to Tarsus. But it couldn't have hurt that the man who came to get Paul was Barnabas—the one man in Jerusalem who had gone out on a limb for Paul. No doubt Paul would have said “Yes” to the chance to proclaim the love of God in Antioch no matter who invited him back. But how fitting it was Barnabas who had the privilege of inviting him back into ministry—and the privilege of hearing Paul say “Yes! Let's go, Now!”

There's no greater privilege than to hearing those whom you have encouraged say “Yes” to the call of God in their lives. Have you known that privilege, when God uses you to go after someone, to go to bat for someone, to believe in them as Jesus believes in them—and maybe to hear

them say, “Yes! Let’s go, Now!”

You can do this! You can be the one who remembers, and goes after, the one who has maybe given up on God for the time being, or the one who feels the church has kicked them out or spit them out. You can believe in them, and let them know it; you can go after them, and invite them back out of their spiritual retirement.

IV We’ll fast forward to the last time we read of Barnabas in Acts. By this point, Barnabas and Paul had remained for over a year to help pastor that grand new experiment of a church in Antioch. While they were all worshipping God and fasting, the Holy Spirit told the church to send out Barnabas and Paul on what we call Paul’s first missionary journey. [Acts 13:3 It was amazing, but it’s not the point for this morning.] One minor detail to note: when they left Antioch, it was always “Barnabas and Paul”; when they return it’s now “Paul and Barnabas.” Paul’s gifts and boldness and brilliance exceeded those of Barnabas. Barnabas no doubt noticed that. He was there. But he didn’t need to be the “main man”, the star of God’s missionary show. He embraced his role—the encourager, the support guy—and rejoiced when Paul succeeded. This, also, is what encouragers do. This is what those full of the Holy Spirit do, who remember as we abide in Christ we have everything we need; as we pursue God first and obey Him, we receive everything we need and much more. The more we give away to others in service to Christ the more surely we are renewed and re-filled.

Paul and Barnabas returned to the church in Antioch, their home base, after their first journey. They settled in there and taught and preached and pastored, until Paul sensed the Spirit telling him to get on the road and do it all again. One snag, though. Barnabas wanted to take along John Mark, called simply Mark, on their next journey. Paul would have none of it: Mark had deserted them when the going got tough in Pamphylia (now the south coast of Turkey.) Sadly, this rift caused Paul to take Silas and go on without Barnabas, who set off with Mark to Cyprus.

By now you can guess what good result is going to come thru Barnabas, the “son of encouragement.” He cannot support Paul any more. But this time he takes a chance on Mark; even though he had been a deserter and a coward. Barnabas saw him as he presumed God saw him; Barnabas saw what Mark might yet become. And again God used Barnabas to change the world. First he had gone and retrieved Paul and helped God set him loose. Now Barnabas bet on Mark. He forgave him; he encouraged him.

He helped Mark to become a new man—which, happily, even Paul recognized, asking Timothy to please bring Mark to be with him in Rome at the end of his life. You may know that this Mark is most likely the one to whom Peter told the story of the life of Jesus, and tradition tells us this Mark is the same one who wrote the first gospel.

Without Barnabas to have believed in Mark, taken a chance on him, extended God’s forgiveness and generally encouraged him this gospel may never have been written. (Without Mark, who knows about the gospels of Matthew and Luke...)

You may not dramatically change the history of the world, the way Barnabas did.

But you can be the one who gets to clap and cheer for all the others. You can be the one who recognizes and encourages the gifts in those around you—even if they seem to eclipse your own. You can be an important part of a church whose people are known for their kindness, their encouragement for one another.

You can be “a good man, or a good woman, full of the Holy Spirit and full of trust in God.” [11:24]

Acts 4:36-37

36 There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”).

37 He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Acts 9:26-30

26 When Paul had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

27 But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

28 So Paul went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

29 He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him.

30 When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Acts 11:19-26

19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews.

20 But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus.

21 The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.

22 News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion;

24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,

26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians."

Acts 15:35-39

35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."

37 Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.

38 But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work.

39 The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

40 But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord.