

THE POWER OF ENCOURAGEMENT
Acts 4:36-37

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G. K. Chesterton, an English journalist, once wrote, “The really great person is the person who makes every person feel great.”

That’s really true, isn’t it? When two people interact with each other, they are both changed forever. I have a lasting influence on you, and you will have a lasting influence on me. And whether our influence is helpful or hurtful, positive or negative, depends on whether we give each other the gift of encouragement.

Encouragers are special people in each of our lives. You know who the encouragers are in your life. Are you an encourager in someone’s life?

Encouragers are pleasant to be around because they are optimistic and enthusiastic. They have a quiet self-confidence about themselves which enables them to focus on others, rather than demanding constant attention to fulfill their own emotional needs. I think of Robby Barrett as such a person in my life and in the lives of many people at First Baptist Church. Robby doesn’t need a whole lot from anybody else, but Robby is constantly giving encouragement to others.

Encouragers, by nature, are other-focused and not self-focused.

Encouragers make really good Christians because Christianity is a relationship religion. I bet you have no idea how biblical the idea of encouragement really is. This is not just pop psychology today. This is the word of God for you today.

Discouragers, on the other hand, play a destructive role in our lives. Have you been someone’s discourager? I bet you can tell me about a time when someone discouraged you.

Duane Brooks is pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston – a great church in the state of Texas. He said it was a tough time in the Brooks family. His dad was working a couple of jobs, trying to make money to support his family – a family of four sons. When Duane was in the fourth grade, he told his father he wanted to play baseball.

“No, you don’t want to play baseball,” his father barked.

“Yes I do. I’d really like to sign up for a baseball team.”

“No, you don’t want to play baseball,” his father retorted.

“Now, Dad, I really do. I want to play baseball.”

“Okay,” his dad said abruptly. He took Duane out to the field and threw the ball as hard as he could at Duane’s chest. Duane dodged the ball, and his father looked at him and said, “I told you you’re not a baseball player.” And his father turned and walked away, leaving his son – Duane – standing alone in the field.

On that occasion, Duane’s father discouraged the dreams and the hopes of his son.

When have you discouraged your son? Your daughter? Your employees? Your friends?

Let me tell you who the encouragers in scripture are. The Bible is full of examples of encouragers. For instance, take Moses. God commanded him to encourage Joshua, who was about to take his place as national leader of Israel. “Go up to the top of Pisgah, and lift up your eyes to the west and north and south and east, and see it with your eyes, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. But charge Joshua and encourage him and strengthen him; for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall give them as an inheritance the land which you will see” (Deuteronomy 3:27-28).

Or Hezekiah, who spoke reassuring words to the discouraged people of Jerusalem during the siege of the city by the Assyrian King Sennacherib. 2 Chronicles 32 tells us, “And he appointed military officers over the people, and gathered them to him in the square at the city gate, and spoke encouragingly to them, saying, ‘Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria....’” (vs. 6-7). Then he told them the Lord was with them.

Paul, one of the greatest encouragers of the New Testament, wrote to the Colossians, “I am sending Tychicus to encourage you.” To both Timothy and Titus, Paul commanded, “Encourage your churches.”

In Acts, the church in Jerusalem sent a letter to the Christians in Antioch, and it says, “They were encouraged.” Then we learn about Silas: “Silas had much to encourage the brothers.” Four times in 1 Thessalonians we are admonished to encourage one another. And the writer of Hebrews says, “Encourage one another daily.”

Do you know the ministry of encouragement is central to a healthy church? Over thirty times in the New Testament, encouragement is mentioned as a duty of believers. We live in a world that discourages us on every hand.

The cowboy sings about being home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play, where seldom is heard a discouraging word. Now I don’t know what kind of Utopian fantasy world he was living in, because, more often than not, the world can be a very discouraging place.

During the Boer War, 1899-1902, a man was convicted of a very unusual crime. He was found guilty of being a discourager. While the South African town of Ladysmith was under attack, this traitor would move up and down the line of soldiers who were defending the city, and he would do everything he could to dampen their spirits. He would point out the enemy’s strength, the

difficulty of defending the city, and assert the eventual capture of the city. He didn't use a gun in his attack. It wasn't necessary. His weapon was the power of discouragement.

I'm not just throwing stones at you. When Ryan was a toddler, she said to me one time, "Daddy, talk to me like you talk to Jake (our dog)." I had to think, "What is she saying to me – talk to me like you talk to Jake." And then I understood that when I talked to Jake, I used a real high-pitched, loving voice, telling him what a good boy he was. And I was barking at her, "Don't. Stop. Quit." Well, there go your pastor's child rearing skills. His kids wanted to be talked to like he talks to his dog.

We live in a discouraging world, looking for an encouraging word. And we all want someone to talk to us like I used to talk to Jake, God rest his sweet soul.

This morning, we look at Barnabas, the one whose very name means "Son of encouragement." Barnabas was an individual who had the ability to hold people up, to encourage them. He was the kind of individual who believed in people. He didn't give up on individuals, even when everybody else had long since cast them aside.

The first time we see Barnabas is in Acts 4:36-37.

And Joseph, a Levi of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

I. Barnabas encouraged by giving to others.

The Christian church, you will remember, is still very young at this point. Following the outpouring of God's Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the church had grown from 120 to over 3,000. There were many needs, and money was needed to meet those needs. And Barnabas, having a piece of land, sold it and gave the money to the church to help meet those needs.

We need people like Barnabas in our churches who are willing to make those kinds of sacrifices so that the needs might be met, so that people might be encouraged.

There are a lot of reasons we can give – a sense of duty, guilt, pressure, the hope of getting something back from God when we give to church. But a great reason to give is because we want to be encouragers to our church family.

The questions you have to ask yourself are:

- Do you really believe that Jesus is the Son of God? •Next, do you believe that God was at work His crucifixion and resurrection?
- Do you see the church as the bride of Christ that carries forth the gospel to a lost and dying world?
- Do you see the church as a vital part of your life and the life of your family?

If you don't really support the church, then you don't really believe those things. If you believe in the gospel and you believe in Christ's church, then you must give.

Barnabas gave because he loved God and he loved God's people. He wanted to encourage those who had come into the gospel.

II. Barnabas encouraged by believing in others (Acts 9:26-28)

“And when he [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; and they were all afraid of [Paul], not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.”

Paul, you remember, had been a persecutor of the church. He had bound Christians and carried them to Jerusalem. He had a fierce reputation, and everyone thought his supposed conversion was simply an undercover move as a persecutor of the people of God.

But Paul wasn't a fake. Paul had made a true conversion, and his very life was at stake because of his faith. The Jews had plotted to kill him. At Damascus, the Jews had surrounded the city and guarded all the gates carefully, so as not to let him escape. And at night, the disciples placed him in a large basket and lowered him over the city wall.

In Jerusalem, Paul tried to associate with the apostles. But they would have nothing to do with him because of their fear of him. They'd heard how he had treated God's people, and they were staying away from him. And they expected him to stay away from them. They were shunning the apostle Paul, who had seen the risen Christ just as they had.

Who steps forward? It's Barnabas, the encourager. He's willing to risk a relationship with Paul. He believes in Paul and brings him to the other disciples. And because Barnabas accepted him, they began to accept him. In that moment of fear, prejudice and rejection, Barnabas stepped in and stood alongside Paul.

This is a bold statement, but I believe it to be true. You find anyone (in this case, Paul) who is doing great things, and that person has others who have encouraged him along the way. No one is an island unto himself when it comes to success.

Encouragers bring out the best in others, but that's what makes an encourager so likeable. Encouragers really listen to others when they speak – as Barnabas really listened to the story of Paul. They are patient and slow to judge. And they take time for others in a way that makes them feel special.

No one achieves anything great without help. Great achievers in history became all that they were because somebody in their life believed in them. And Paul became great, in part, because Barnabas affirmed him.

Think about it, teachers. A word of encouragement from you can change a child's life forever. Think about it, coach. A word of encouragement from you can change how a young man feels about himself for an entire season, maybe a lifetime. Think about it Sunday School teacher. Sitting down and telling a child how great they are doing and how much you enjoy seeing her every week

can change her life forever. Think about it, employer. A word of encouragement can make a good employee a great employee.

If you wonder whether or not someone needs encouragement, I'll give you a foolproof test. If they are breathing, they need encouragement.

Some of you are not encouragers. You're discouragers. You go through life like a cloud raining on everybody else's parade. You are not like Barnabas. You are not like Paul. You are not like Moses. You are not like Hezekiah.

III. Barnabas encouraged by serving (Acts 11:21-26).

“And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”

Saul's persecution had scattered the church. Some of the believers had settled in Antioch, 300 miles north of Jerusalem. As the gospel began to spread throughout this large city of a half million, Acts 11:21 says, “And a large number who believed turned to the Lord.” When the church in Jerusalem heard about the work of the Lord in Antioch, they decided to send one man to investigate. They couldn't believe a revival of this nature could break out in a place like Antioch. Up until now, converts to Christianity had come largely from Jewish backgrounds, but Antioch was a city of Greek culture and influence. So they sent Barnabas to investigate.

Barnabas was willing to go the extra mile, to get involved in peoples' lives, to strengthen them, to serve, to encourage them in the Lord. He tells us in Acts that he began to encourage them with a resolute heart to remain true to the Lord.

Are you willing to be an encourager by serving others?

Bud Wilkinson, former football coach at the University of Oklahoma, delivered a series of lectures on physical fitness years ago. A TV reporter was interviewing him about the President's physical fitness program and asked Wilkinson this question, “What would you say is the contribution of modern football to physical fitness?” The reporter was expecting a lengthy answer from this legendary coach. But Wilkinson answered, “Absolutely nothing.”

The reporter stared and squirmed and finally stuttered, “Would you care to elaborate on that?”

Wilkinson said, “Certainly. I define football as twenty-two men on the field who desperately need rest and 50,000 plus people in the stands who desperately need exercise.”

Sometimes that's a good depiction of the church today. We've got too few doing too much. More of us need to get involved, risking and investing ourselves to serve others. You have opportunities every day to reach out and to serve. Do you see the open doors? Do you see the open windows?

Douglas Maurer of Creve Coeur, Missouri, was 15 when he felt bad for several days. His mother took him to the hospital in St. Louis where he was diagnosed as having leukemia. The doctors told him in frank terms about his disease. They said that for the next three years he would have to undergo chemotherapy. They didn't sugarcoat the side effects. They told Douglas he would go bald and that his body would most likely bloat. Upon hearing this, he went into a deep depression.

His aunt called a floral shop to send Douglas an arrangement of flowers. She told the clerk that it was for her teenage nephew who had leukemia. When the flowers arrived at the hospital, they were beautiful. Douglas read the card from his aunt without emotion. Then he noticed a second card. It said: "Douglas – I took your order. I work at Brix Florist. I had leukemia when I was seven years old. I'm 22 years old now. Good luck. My heart goes out to you. Sincerely, Laura Bradley."

His face lit up. "Oh wow!" he said.

Douglas Maurer was in a hospital filled with millions of dollars of the most sophisticated technological equipment. He was being treated by expert doctors and nurses with competent medical training. But it was a sales clerk in a flower shop, a young woman making about \$200 a week, who – by taking the time to care, to invest her life in Doug's life, to do what her heart told her to do – who gave Douglas hope. And Douglas carried on. (www.preaching.com)

Are you willing to reach out, to serve and invest your life in the lives of others?

IV. Barnabas encouraged by forgiving (Acts 15:36-41)

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

You remember that Paul and Barnabas and John Mark had been on the first missionary journey. Things went well until they arrived at Pamphylia. For reasons unknown to us, John Mark left the team and went home to Jerusalem. The sacrifices may have been too great. He may have been homesick. But for whatever reason, he didn't like it and he went home.

As they prepared for their second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark. Paul said, “No way. He was a quitter the first time, and I will not give him a second chance.” He can’t be trusted in the heart of battle, Paul was saying. In fact, the tension between them was so acute that Paul and Barnabas split ways. Paul took a new missionary partner, and Barnabas went on his own missionary trip accompanied by the man he was willing to forgive, the man he was willing to give a second chance – his cousin, John Mark.

If you’re going to be an encouraging Christian, you’re going to have to be a forgiver.

Most of our hardships in our relationships is based on the fact that we’re trying to find out who’s right and who’s wrong and who wins and who loses. I don’t have to know if I’m right or I’m wrong – most of the time, I just need to forgive and I need to be forgiven.

By the way, Paul learned to forgive John Mark.

In Ephesians 4:32, Paul said, “And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

In 2 Timothy 4:11, he tells Timothy – in this, his last letter ever penned – “Go and get John Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.” Paul had worked through his resentment, his bitterness, his hard feelings. And like a true encourager, a true man of God, he forgave John Mark. And he became an encourager to him.

So what are you going to be? An encourager? Or a discourager? Everybody who comes in contact with you – at school, the hospital, the bank, the office, at church, on the playing field – everybody will either be encouraged or discouraged. You’re going to leave your mark. The question is will you be a Barnabas, will you be a Son of encouragement?

I started my sermon by telling you about Duane Brooks, about his father who threw the baseball at his chest and belittled his desire to be on a baseball team. Fast forward 30 years. Duane was a man who had his own sons. This son’s name is Chase. He’s in the fourth grade, just like his daddy had been. And guess what he wants to play? He wants to play baseball. In fact, he was on a baseball team. Duane, remembering how his father had treated him when he wanted to play baseball, tried to be an encourager to his son in his athletic endeavors.

Oddly enough, Duane’s father came to visit. Duane asks his father – a father who had probably long forgotten hurling the ball at his son’s chest in a moment of anger, in a moment of discouragement – “Do you want to go watch Chase and I pitch?”

“Sure, I’d like that,” his father said.

They went out to the park, and Duane pitched to his son. And Duane’s father, who had abruptly hurled the baseball at him and left him standing alone on the field, said, “Hey, can I do that? I’d like to pitch the ball to my grandson.”

And for two hours Duane watched his father gently toss the ball back and forth with Chase. And the wound was healed. His father, who had once been a discourager, became an encourager to the sons in his family.