

The Example of Barnabas

Acts 11

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Of all the players in this chapter, one stands out. Peter has been the main man amongst the apostles. But we have focused on others, like Stephen and Paul.

For me, it is Barnabas who stands out in this chapter. The reason he stands out is because of the example he sets for us. We see elements of Christ-likeness his words and actions. And for the believer, to be Christ-like is their highest goal in this life.

We see how the growth of the church in this period set in motion a sequence of events which would be repeated throughout church history different forms:

- The church grew
- It got noticed
- It became a threat to the established religious order
- Hostilities increased
- Stephen was murdered because of his faith in Christ
- Persecution increased some more
- It forced believers to flee
- The gospel went to Samaria and other places as a result
- Saul was emboldened to hunt down Christians
- He was then saved by a dramatic intervention of Christ
- This gave momentum to the persecutors
- The church was spread out even more
- And now we see the gospel's powerful effects all the way up north in Antioch

Before we consider Barnabas in any detail, I thought I should make a few comments about the circumstances he worked within.

When we were last in Acts three weeks ago, we considered the important conversion of Cornelius and his household. His conversion was a milestone in the development of church.

Christians in Judaea hear about what happened with Peter and his interactions with these Gentiles. Peter returns to Jerusalem. And as we've seen, some of the disciples of Jesus were clinging to their Jewish thinking.

The only thing they can think about was why Peter was mixing with these uncircumcised men. They criticised him. Why were you mixing with them? Why were you even eating with them?

You might remember me saying that the Law didn't forbid Jews from eating with Gentiles. It didn't prevent them from speaking to them. It did warn that mixing too much with them could lead to corruption. And their history showed them that whenever their forefathers had become a bit too

friendly with their pagan neighbours, it was the Israelites that were influenced by paganism, not the other way round.

It's not so different for us. We can work alongside unbelievers. We can be friends with them. We all have unbelieving relatives! But the word of God does warn us about it. We need to be watchful. It's very common for Christians to allow their language and habits to be influenced by the unbelievers they mix with.

And even if you don't think yourself particularly prone to that danger, you should still keep the warning in mind. The slide from Christ-like manners to Satan-like manner is very smooth; very easy.

Peter patiently explains what went on. He gives them an account of his vision, his mission from the Holy Spirit to go to the house of Cornelius, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on those Gentiles.

Peter tells them that this incident brought to his mind the promise Jesus concerning the baptism by the Holy Spirit. Peter is giving evidence to these sceptical Christians to persuade them that these Gentiles have received the spirit the same as they had.

You may have been irritated by their criticism of Peter. But look at how they responded to the sincere testimony of a fellow believer. The criticism ended. They started to glorify God for the thing. They were saying, *That's it then! It's confirmed: God is now giving repentance to the Gentiles too. They are to receive the gift of eternal life as well as us.*

I've been as stubborn in some of my beliefs as these Jewish Christians. I've held traditions as sacred, just as they did. But they were more open to reason. Because within about three minutes, they happily admitted they were wrong and they glorified God.

Friends, there are core beliefs that I'd encourage you to hold firmly for the rest of your lives. For example, you believe Jesus died for sinful people and that he rose from the dead. Beliefs like that form the basis of our faith. We don't have to do spend time wondering if these things are true or not. You don't have to be ready to change your mind on them.

But I'd venture to say that most of what you believe shouldn't be held strongly. My own journey has resulted in me being sure of fewer things. And the number of things I'm less dogmatic about has increased.

If we can identify those things which are not the foundation of our faith, we hold those beliefs more lightly. This means that you won't overreact when someone approaches you with an alternative view. You might still reject what they say, but you'll at least be gracious in giving it some thought. It also means that you'll have a more loving attitude to those brethren who have different views from you.

But the example I want us to look at today is not that of the circumcision party in Jerusalem. It's rather the example Barnabas sets. So who is he again?

We met him a couple of chapters ago. Saul had been converted on that road to Damascus. He eventually made his way to Jerusalem. The Christians were justifiably scared. Five minutes ago, this Saul character had been travelling all over the place arresting Christians and hoping they'd received the death penalty. This guy was a maniac and the chief persecutor of the church. He was the last person they wanted to welcome into their community.

Up steps Barnabas. He says a word on Paul's behalf. Like Peter, Barnabas testifies to people. He puts a good word in for Paul. He commends Paul to them. And such was the respect and trust towards Barnabas that the church embraced Paul as a brother.

Barnabas clearly had leadership qualities. But more importantly he had *Christ-like* qualities. And we'll look at just a few of these today.

The man's name was Joseph, but the disciples started calling him Barnabas. And in just a few lines of Scripture, we pick up some characteristics which we'd do well to copy.

1. He was a man of use

A person of use. Useful. He was valued within the Christian community.

Some believers had travelled to Antioch and preached the gospel. V20 describes their activity as "preaching the Lord Jesus". After all, the gospel is all about the Lord Jesus.

By the mercy of God, their testimony was used to great effect. Many were converted. And when the news of this reached the church in Jerusalem, they made a wise decision. They considered that a responsible person should be sent to assess what had been going on and oversee the mission there.

But who would they send? Who was trustworthy? Who had the Spirit of God? Who had displayed wise leadership?

Perhaps a number of them. **But they chose Barnabas.** They judged that he had received gifts from the Lord that were very suitable for this particular mission.

At the end of this chapter, you'll notice Barnabas was chosen for another job. He was to accompany Paul himself in transporting funds to the saints in Judaea to get them through a temporary time of hardship.

2. He was a man of grace

When we speak of him as a person of grace, we don't mean primarily that he'd been an object of God's grace himself. He had, of course. It was by the grace of God that he'd been given faith in Christ. And what more important thing can happen to a person?

If you've been the object the grace of God in that way, then you too have faith in Christ.

But it has its effects. And one of these effects is that *you love to see the grace of God at work in other people.*

- When you meet people, how wonderful is it if you find out that they're Christians?
- When you speak to people who already known to be Christians, how great is it when you hear about how the Lord has been moving in their lives?
- And when you listen to missionary reports from faraway lands, how encouraging is it to hear that many others are experiencing the grace of God in their lives too?

Barnabas was no different. You see this in v23. When he arrived and saw the grace of God at work, it says **he was glad**. *It made him happy*. He knew what the grace of God meant. He knew that these people would be sharing the joy of eternal life with him.

3. He was a man of encouragement

He loved to encourage the brethren. And this shouldn't surprise us. Because if we see the grace of God at work in others, then perhaps by our encouragements we'll see the grace of God more at work in them. Imagine our words of encouragement resulting in their greater obedience to God and conformity to Christ.

Verse 23 continues with this record of exhortation. His encouragement of them. The last thing he wanted to see was them stumbling in their Christian walk. For their faith in Christ to weaken. So he urges them to remain faithful to the Lord. He encourages them to be single-minded and focused in their service.

You may have forgotten this, but Barnabas was mentioned all the way back in Chapter 4. It was a while ago. But when he was introduced to us, it explained that the name the disciples started using for him, Barnabas in other words, means "Son of Encouragement". Clearly, he exhibited this characteristic of encouragement so much that it earned him this nickname.

I'm just plain old "Paul". Imagine if I was renowned for being an encourager of the brethren. So much so that it would define me. People would say, *You know the Paul I mean. The one from Liverpool. The one who's always encouraging the brethren. Yes, him.*

Pinned up on the wall in my study is a Scripture. It's there to remind me what my ministry is to look like. And one of the core responsibilities for the pastor, or the preacher of righteousness, is **encouraging the believers**.

And so it is that, according to my ability, I try to encourage you to remain steadfast in the faith, and this very message is an encouragement to you to pay some attention to these Christ-like behaviours.

4. He was a man of goodness

V24 tells us that Barnabas was *good*. It tells us that it was because he was a good man that he encouraged the brethren. The inward attribute of goodness led to the outward act of encouragement.

When Barnabas arrived in this world, he was **no** good. He wasn't a good man. Oh, he may have appeared to be a good man when compared to others. He may have been a respectable man. A decent chap.

But friends, how pointless it is to judge ourselves by the standard of other people! Every one of those other people are sinful creatures. They too came into this world in a state of sinfulness.

THIS MEANS THAT THEY WERE DISGUSTING TO GOD. THEY WERE A FOUL STENCH TO HIM. HE COULD BARELY STAND TO LOOK AT THEM. That's how serious sin is to an all-holy God.

Sure, Barnabas was one of God's elect. His salvation was always going to take place at a certain time in his life. But before that, he was effectively an enemy of God.

The Scriptures describe Barnabas here as “good” because he has been made good by God who is himself all good. If you describe an unbeliever you know as a “decent sort of guy”, I know that were both on the same page. We both know that technically, that is in the eyes of God, that man isn't decent at all. We both understand each other. We mean that he is less bad than most.

Barnabas was truly good, then, because a merciful God had interrupted his course of life. And if you're hearing me today and you too have submitted yourself to the Lord, he has made YOU good. God the Holy Spirit, who is goodness itself, lives in you. And incredible as it seems, **God looks on you now as good.**

You'll notice in v24 that this goodness of Barnabas is explained a bit more. It tells us he had the Holy Spirit and true faith.

Does it say that? Look again. Let's be more precise: it says he was FULL of the Holy Spirit and FULL of faith.

All believers possess the Holy Spirit in their hearts. All believers have faith in the Lord. But not all believers are full of the Holy Spirit. Not all have great faith in God. *But this is our great aim.* Which is why the Bible counsels us to pray that we might be filled with the Holy Spirit and pray that the Lord would increase our faith.

5. He was a man of the church

Barnabas had been chosen for these special missions. He'd been responsible for the admittance of Paul into the church community. He'd had this reputation for these good qualities.

It'd be very easy for him to think highly of himself. To insist on doing things by himself so that he got all the credit. Maybe even start his own denomination.

Such people have always been found in the church of God. They see themselves as special. Crucially, they don't regard others in the church as better than them. And that's something that we must strive to do. For all the faults we see in other people, we must nevertheless do our best to esteem them more highly than we esteem ourselves.

But some don't. They reason that, if they're merely part of a larger group of people, they can no longer be special in any way. The result is they're not team players. They become "lone wolves".

You'll spot lone wolves today quite easily. You get people starting their own ministries. Their ministry is essentially just them! And they can be very enthusiastic.

Maybe you get speaking to them. And you ask them what congregation they belong to. And they might say that they usually attend such and such a place, but they sometimes attend this church or that church.

You realise that they don't truly belong anywhere. They don't understand the importance of the body of Christ. That they need a congregation to call their own. That they need to be accountable. That they need to be sent by a fellowship of the Lord's people and not merely self-appointed.

Barnabas wasn't like that. He was a churchman. He was happy to serve the church and submit himself to it. When it came to the Antioch mission, they sent...and he went!

You see more evidence of this in v25. Barnabas could've stayed in Antioch and been held in high regard as the leader of that great movement of the Holy Spirit.

But what did he do?

- He realised that he could do with some help.
- He considered that he could do would Paul at his side for such an important job.
- He understood that he was part of something bigger than himself: the body of Christ.

We're all to submit to one another. We're to serve one another. We're not to be primarily thinking about our own good but the good of our brethren. We're to be utterly selfless in our Christian walk. We're to be team players, not lone wolves.

I spoke very highly of Barnabas because the word of God does. But the same word of God teaches us that we continue to sin after the Lord has delivered us from the consequences of it.

We'll sin less than we would've had God not changed us. We'll suddenly hate sin and wish more than anything we could stop.

But we still sin each day. And Barnabas was no different. Later on, we'll see that he has a row with Paul. I'm not going to say which one of them was in the wrong there, but it could just as easily have been the fault of Barnabas as Paul because they were both still sinful.

The fact that we continue to sin after receiving the Holy Spirit doesn't mean that we're to accept this as our fate. God doesn't want you to philosophise about the impossibility of being sinless. His demand on you is that you stop sinning. Immediately. Right now. And don't ever sin again.

That's what your Lord and saviour requires of you. Oh, he knows it's tough. He's even the one who sends the trials that so often end up with us committing sin. But there are no excuses.

I'm guessing that you're the same as me. You sin every day. You hate the fact that you sin every day, but you still do it. And you'll probably do it tomorrow. Tomorrow? Today!

That's something we need to work on every hour of the day, every day. **But we shouldn't let that distract us from our duty to be examples to others.** Barnabas is being held up today as an example for us.

I'm not presenting him to you as someone to merely think of more highly; *I'm presenting him to you so that you will be such a person yourself.* To not just think what great characteristics he had but to *seek them for yourself.* To exhibit them yourself.

- You should attempt to make yourself a person who is of use to the church
- You should be glad to see the grace of God at work in others
- You should encourage the brethren in any way you can
- You should seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith
- And you should exhibit all these things as part of the team that is Nero church whatever church you belong to, which themselves are part of a wider, universal church which spans the ages.

I thought it was interesting that Antioch was the first time that the disciples were called "Christians". We use the word so often we don't think it's at all unusual.

But this was a new word for these believers. They never really used it to describe themselves. And it was probably used as a sort of insult at first.

Regardless of how it was used back then, that's what we're known as today. And are you not happy with that name? We get to be named after our master, Jesus Christ. That's pretty good!

You, friends, are ambassadors for him. You carry his name, and you represent him by being like him—so like him that you become good examples for other believers.

Let the example of Barnabas today be the springboard from which you go on to be top-class ambassadors for Jesus Christ. You carry his name, so take that duty seriously.

1 Peter 4:16—Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

Amen