

Barnabas: Son of Encouragement

Acts 9:26-30; 11:19-26

A [recent survey](#) by the American Survey Center tells us that Americans now have fewer close friends than they did a couple decades ago. In 1990, 75% of Americans said they had a “best friend,” but by 2021, this number had dropped to 59%. It’s hard to know all the reasons for this shortage of close friends—perhaps our phones and social media buffer us from real relationships, perhaps political tension puts us on edge. At least one thing seems clear: it is costly to *be* a good friend, and so good friends are harder to come by.

It comes of no surprise that we see a sharp contrast between this crisis of friendship in our culture and the kind of friendships forged among Christians in the book of Acts. After all, it is the work of God’s Spirit to replicate the life of Jesus inside people—renewing and undoing the damage done by sin. This includes, of course, the relational damage of sin. Instead of stinginess, the Holy Spirit produces generosity; instead of self-absorption, the Holy Spirit produces a focus on others’ needs, and so on.

Although he is easily overlooked in studies on the book of Acts, Barnabas stands as a towering example of a loyal friend. In fact, he is the kind of friend everyone wants—but few dare to be. We were first introduced to him back in 4:36, where he was identified by a well-earned nickname: Barnabas, meaning “son of encouragement.” If we want to know what authentic Christian friendship looks like, we better take a close look at the life of Barnabas, this son of encouragement.

1. What Barnabas Gave

In Acts 4:35-37, we see Barnabas giving financial support to the needs in Jerusalem. But later we see him giving something even more costly: personal support to Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:26-30). When no one else would believe that Paul had genuinely been converted (9:26), Barnabas did. He gave Paul his personal support by bringing Paul personally to the apostles. In doing so, he took a great risk in binding his reputation to the character of a former killer of Christians.

But Barnabas also gave his personal support to another man: his cousin John Mark. At some point along a journey, John Mark had abandoned Paul and Barnabas, and Paul didn’t think it would be wise to risk another trip with him. Barnabas, however, insisted that he come along, and this led to an irresolvable rift between Paul and Barnabas.

2. What It Cost Barnabas

Barnabas’ generosity was incredibly costly. By giving Paul his personal support, he risked his own reputation. But by traveling *with* Paul, he gave up the limelight, as he was soon eclipsed by the talents of the great apostle to the Gentiles (13:15; 14:12). Then when he gave his support to John Mark, he lost Paul himself, his close friend and fellow missionary. He is never mentioned again in the book of Acts.

3. How Barnabas Could Afford This.

Most of us would consider this kind of friendship too costly. How did Barnabas afford it? We are given the reason in Acts 11:23-24: “He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” Barnabas could afford to give so much because he was so full, because he had been given so much. First, he understood God’s lavish grace displayed in Christ’s death and resurrection. Second, he fully believed this (“full of faith”). Third, in believing this he was full of the Holy Spirit, who is always at work in believers to remind them of the riches they have in Christ (John 16:14).. The lesson we must learn from the life of Barnabas is this: We can *afford* such radical, self-forgetting generosity only if we know that have been *shown* such radical self-forgetting generosity; and we learn that only through faith in Jesus Christ, who gave everything up for us to make us rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Application Questions:

1. Read Acts 9:1-2 and 26-27 and discuss how Barnabas *might have* argued himself out of advocating for Paul to the apostles.
2. Of all the things Barnabas gave up (see “What It Cost Barnabas” above), which would you find the most painful to lose?
3. Which of the following do you tend to find yourself doing the most?
 - Being reluctant to get close to someone who might outshine you
 - Being reluctant to get close to someone whose flaws might get associated with you
 - Being stingy with your words of affirmation, compliments, or encouragement
 - Being reluctant or unwilling to offer an idea or help unless you get the recognition for it
 - Begrudging it when others receive compliments which you feel that you deserve
4. When we act in these ways, what does this tell us about our confidence in the riches we have in Christ?
5. What does faith and the Holy Spirit have to do with our willingness to sacrifice reputation, relationships, attention, etc.?