

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Barnabas - a model pastor: A good man, the character of the pastor

Today we begin a new series on the character of Barnabas who, it seems to me, is an outstanding example to us of a model pastor.

Some key verses for our study are Acts 11:22-25: *“Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul.”*

In Acts 11:24 Barnabas is described as *“a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.”* Over the next three talks we are to look at these three aspects of a pastor:

- *“A good man”* - the character of the pastor;
- *“Full of the Holy Spirit”* - the power of the pastor; and
- *“Full of faith”* - the life of the pastor.

To explore the character of the model pastor I want to trace the features of Barnabas' character as they emerge in the New Testament. We start in Acts 4:32-37: *“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet”* (New International Version).

Barnabas was characterised by sacrificial giving

Acts 4:32-37 record the extraordinary period at the beginning of the formation of Christ's church on earth. A key feature of this time was the outpouring of sacrificial giving. And, amongst all the Christians who expressed this sacrifice, one man is singled out. He was a Levite called Joseph, whose home was Cyprus. There was something remarkable about the character of Joseph and the apostles called him “Barnabas”, which meant “son of encouragement.”

Barnabas begins his history in the New Testament marked by three things - faith in Christ, a willingness to sacrifice and a desire to be an encouragement. This detail is given just before covetousness is recorded as the first sin which affected the Church (see the events of Acts 5:1-11).

The character of a true pastor is marked by:

- A personal and genuine living faith in Jesus Christ;
- A sacrificial love for God's people; and
- An unremitting desire to care for, encourage and build up Christ's church, the flock of God.

Barnabas was characterised by true friendship

Barnabas' desire to care for God's people is illustrated in Acts 9 in connection with a new disciple called Saul of Tarsus, later known as the Apostle Paul. We are familiar with Saul's violent persecution of the young Christian church in Jerusalem (see Acts 8:1-3, Acts 9:1-2) and his meeting with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:3-9.

When Paul returns to Jerusalem after his conversion he attempts to meet with the disciples there. But everyone was afraid of him and doubted his salvation (Acts 9:26). It is at this point Barnabas steps in: *“But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that he had spoken*

to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus” (Acts 9:27).

The heart of Barnabas goes out to Paul. He immediately befriends him and introduces him to the apostles. He recognises the reality of Saul's faith in Christ and brings him into the fellowship of the Lord's people. The ministry of a true pastor is to care for the people of God and to integrate them into the Church of Christ and to ensure they are not isolated.

It was the beginning of a friendship between Barnabas and Saul that would be at the foundation of the explosion of missionary endeavour - the spread of the Gospel throughout the Roman world, and the formation of many Christian assemblies under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit.

Barnabas was characterised by goodness

The preparation for this work is quite remarkable. It was not planned or organised. No leaders were chosen and financed. God brought about the spiritual awakening in Antioch as a result of the great persecution in Jerusalem which followed the death of Stephen: *“Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:19-20).*

It always astonishes me that God uses the very things which were designed to repress and destroy the Christian faith as the means to bless and develop it.

Soon news of the extraordinary work of God in Antioch was reported to the church in Jerusalem. They chose one person to go and minister to the young thriving church - Barnabas: *“Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord” (Acts 11:22-24).*

The first thing we learn about Barnabas in Acts 11:22-24 is that he was good. He was marked by a real and simple desire to serve the people of God selflessly. This is a fundamental aspect of the character of a pastor. This was true of Barnabas before he reached Antioch. It was the reason he had the confidence and fellowship of the apostles and the church at Jerusalem and it enabled him to quickly establish a relationship with the saints at Antioch. A pastor needs to have the confidence of those he serves with, and also of those he shepherds.

The way he related to the church at Antioch is very instructive. He did not arrive waving letters from the apostles nor did he grandstand as a new leading teacher. Quietly he observed the work of God, and with a thankful heart he praised God for what He alone had purposed and begun through the lowly yet powerful service of ordinary Christians who are nameless to us.

The second and vital thing he did was to turn the hearts of his new fellow Christians to Jesus. Barnabas understood that the secret and power of the Christian life lay in a personal closeness to the Lord Jesus. Get that right and everything else will fall into place. And that was the ground upon which he began to teach the young Christians at Antioch.

The next decision he makes is quite remarkable and a wonderful insight into the character of a model pastor: *“Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:25-26).*

So often we can feel, when given spiritual responsibility, that we are central to that work. Barnabas teaches us a very important lesson in caring for the people of God - the recognition and usefulness of other servants of God. When he assessed the work of God going on at Antioch, he immediately thought of how much help his friend Saul could be to these new believers and he sets off to find Saul and bring him to Antioch.

These actions demonstrated that Barnabas was a good man. It was not a self-righteousness upon which some rest when comparing themselves to others and believing they are better than others. No, it is goodness as a feature of the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23. It is that wonderful desire to benefit others at one's own cost and without seeking personal gain. It is marked by cheerful self-sacrifice, kindness and genuine friendship.

The yearlong preaching and teaching ministry of Barnabas and Saul resulted in great blessing. It was at Antioch that

believers in Christ were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). It is interesting that they did not call themselves Christians but others called them Christians. I wonder if this was a result of the people of God at Antioch taking heed to Barnabas's encouragement to stay close to the Lord. In any event, it appears the lives they lived were consistent with the Saviour they followed and presented. They serve as a great example.

Barnabas was characterised by trustworthiness

At the end of Acts 11 we read: *"And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul"* (Acts 11:27-30).

This short passage shows another aspect of the character of Barnabas with his friend Saul. These men were completely trustworthy in the matter of finance. The love of money is a major problem in society and it can be a serious problem amongst the people of God. As I said earlier, it was the first sin that is mentioned with regard to the early church in Jerusalem (see Acts 5:1-11) and has continued to be a problem down through the ages (also see 1 Timothy 6:11).

Paul says to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, *"So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by labouring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'"* (Acts 20:32-35).

Barnabas is introduced to us as a man who began his Christian faith with a great willingness to sacrifice. He ensured along with Saul that what was given freely out of love by those in Antioch was delivered to those in need in Judea. And he teaches us that as Christians we should not be seduced by financial gain but be characterised by sacrificial service and dependence upon the Lord.

After this errand of mercy Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch: *"And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark"* (Acts 12:25).

Barnabas was characterised by readiness to do the will of God

"Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:1-2).

Although we know the book of Acts as "The Acts of the Apostles", it has been more comprehensively called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit". And it was the Holy Spirit who instructed the church at Antioch to separate Barnabas and Saul for the work He had in view. Notice Barnabas is placed first. Because Paul is so prominent in the New Testament we sometimes forget the debt he owed to the saints he learned from, and chief amongst these was his friend Barnabas.

Acts 13:1-15:35 relate to the following things:

- The events of the first missionary journey
- The way the Gospel began to be preached widely to the Gentiles
- The controversy which emerged as a result
- The council at Jerusalem and the apostles' letter.

This section also records the harmonious service of two great men of God, Barnabas and Saul. It demonstrates Barnabas' readiness to follow God's will to serve and suffer in the cause of Christ and to resolve difficulties when they arose. He is an example of the tireless service which should characterise every true pastor.

The first missionary journey ended back in Antioch (Acts 14:26). And it is there where we find that, after delivering the apostles' letter: *"Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also"* (Acts 15:35).

Barnabas is characterised as a true shepherd

Afterwards Paul is exercised about re-visiting the brethren in the cities where they had evangelised: *"Then after some*

days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.' Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark" (Acts 15:36-37).

Notice the difference between the beginning of the first and the second missionary journeys. The first missionary journey began with the Holy Spirit directly acting to choose Barnabas and Saul to be sent out into a new avenue of service (see Acts 13:2-3). The second missionary journey begins with the personal exercise of Paul and his desire to re-visit the assemblies he and Barnabas had been used to establish (see Acts 15:36). God uses both of these means - direct calling and individual exercise - to undertake His work. It is interesting that the work Paul embarked upon was actually changed by the direct intervention to the Holy Spirit in Acts 16:6-10.

Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them: "*Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches*" (Acts 15:37-41, New International Version).

On the one hand it is sad to see two great servants of God disagreeing, but I think, too, that God is teaching us a very important lesson about pastoral care. The exercise for the journey was Paul's and it appears the exercise of Barnabas was the spiritual care of his young relative, John Mark. Paul was taken up with a great vision and he felt he couldn't take with them a young man who previously had withdrawn from the first missionary journey. On the other hand, Barnabas seems to feel that this would be a great spiritual opportunity for John Mark to be restored in the service of God.

The contention between them led them to go in separate directions. Some have suggested Barnabas acted in the way he did because John Mark was a relative. I can only say, thank God for Christians who care about the salvation of their relatives and also care about the spiritual welfare of relatives who are Christians and need shepherding. Too often close family members can be forgotten in our zeal to serve God and we need to think and act carefully about their spiritual welfare. Not to do this leads to spiritual casualties in the families of God's people. Paul writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:8, "*Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*" (New International Version)

Do we think that if God was so concerned that we provide for the material welfare of our families that He would not be more concerned that we care for them spiritually? Think of the potential damage it could have done to John Mark to be told in essence, "You failed in service before: now we cannot trust you in the future!"

Barnabas shows the heart of a true shepherd. As the Good Shepherd (see John 10:11, 14), Jesus cared for the whole flock and that care was demonstrated most clearly by His care for those disciples who failed dreadfully. Think for a moment of the way Jesus restored both Peter (John 21:15-19) and Thomas (John 20:26-29). Think of how Barnabas took Paul and brought him into the fellowship of the Lord's people in Jerusalem after he had so brutalised the people of God in that city (Acts 9:26-27). Never let us underestimate the value of caring for one person in our desire to care for the many.

God wonderfully resolves this whole issue and, I believe, vindicates the action of Barnabas in some of the last words Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:11, "*Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry*" (New International Version).

We get a deep sense in this chapter of Paul's loneliness and his desire for true friends, like Luke, to be with him. That's why in 2 Timothy 4:9 he asks Timothy to visit him quickly. And it is also why he asks Timothy to bring Mark with him because he was helpful to Paul in his ministry. Don't you think it is wonderful that the young man Paul once doubted in service has become a man whose fellowship Paul so valued? But also don't you think it is wonderful that the two young men in whom Barnabas and Paul have invested so much pastoral care were now friends and equally involved in the service of God?

In our future talks we will explore other aspects of Barnabas as a model pastor, but for now let us learn about and reflect on the sacrificial giving, true fellowship, true friendship, goodness, trustworthiness, readiness to do the will of God and true shepherd care seen in this remarkable servant of God.

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