

Series: *Neighbors of the Bible*

Title: *Encouraging Neighbors: The Neighbor With a Nickname*

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Scripture: Acts 4:36, 9:26-28, 11:22-26; 15:36-41

This morning I want us to begin by playing a game. I'm going to name a popular sitcom from down through the years---and you call out the neighbor in each show. Ready?

- *Home Improvement* – Wilson
- *Family Matters* – Steve Urkel
- *The Simpsons* – Ned Flanders
- *Seinfeld* – Kramer
- *I Love Lucy* – Fred and Ethel Mertz
- *All in The Family* – George and Louise Jefferson
- *Everybody Loves Raymond* – Frank and Marie Barone

Good Job! I set this up in the hopes that it would get you in the mood to continue our study of neighboring. Did I succeed? Good---because today we're beginning a series of sermons on of some of the neighbors in the Bible.

The first Biblical neighbor we are looking at is known for an essential quality in all healthy relationships. In fact, this guy was so good at it that it became his nickname. His real name was Joseph. He was a Levite from Cyprus---and he was so skilled at this important quality of neighboring that the disciples called him "*Barnabas*" which means "*Son of Encouragement.*"

Before we go any further let's remind ourselves what encouragement is. The word literally means to "*put courage INTO someone.*" It conveys the idea of giving someone the emotional strength to go on---no matter how discouraging or difficult things are. And, as we all know, life in this world can indeed be discouraging.

Now---as I said a few weeks back, the GREEK word for ENCOURAGEMENT is "*paraklesis*" and it's used more than a hundred times in the New Testament. It comes from the same root as the Greek word for "*HOLY SPIRIT.*" To be more precise, it's a combination of two Greek words: "*para*" meaning "*alongside.*" and the word "*kaleo*" meaning "*to call.*" In other words, in the same way that the Holy Spirit is CALLED ALONGSIDE to help us, we are CALLED ALONGSIDE to help or encourage others. There are lots of ways to do this but the simplest form of encouragement is VERBAL---which of course involves using our WORDS to put courage into someone. As we face the challenges of life, we all know how good it feels to have someone come alongside and encourage us as they say things to us like, "*I am really impressed with your servant attitude!*" or "*You did a great job!*" or "*I really believe you can do this---and do it well!*"

That brings to mind a great example of the power of encouraging words in the life of a man named Imero Fiorention. He died a few years back at the ripe old age of 85. You've probably never heard of him because he did all his work behind the scenes but Imero---or "Immie"---was known for his skill in lighting. He was called, "*the maestro of lighting*" and "*the Picasso of lights and strobes.*" His obituary said, "*He made drinks sparkle, desserts shimmer, and Richard M. Nixon look less shadowy---all with meticulous tricks of lights.*" When he died Immie had served as an adviser to every president from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Bill Clinton. His work had also illuminated some of the biggest entertainers of his day, including Frank Sinatra, Bill Cosby, Neil Diamond, Barbara Streisand, and Muhammad Ali. He orchestrated the lighting behind everything from Walt Disney's Epcot Center to TV commercials for Jell-O and ginger ale. But if it wasn't for the encouraging WORDS from one

of his high school teachers, Immie's career may have ended before it started. You see, several months before graduating from high school, Immie found what he thought was an empty shell casing in the street. Wanting to make it into a key chain, he took a soldering iron to it. Turns out it was a live round. Shrapnel from the explosion pierced his right eye, blinding it. He thought his dream was over---that he would never be able to work in lighting. Then one of his teachers visited him in the hospital and told him, *"You're going to be the best one-eyed lighting designer ever!"* "I can do that," Immie replied.

Thanks to those EN-COURAGING words, Immie went on to earn a bachelor's degree in theater from Carnegie Tech in 1950. On graduating, he was hired to teach theatrical lighting at Indiana University, and from there his career took off.

Encouraging words are powerful things aren't they!? As an old film star from yesteryear, Celeste Holme, once said, *"We LIVE by encouragement and we DIE without it, slowly, sadly, angrily."* I would agree. In fact, I think we each have a minimum daily requirement of uplifting WORDS from others that we must hear---if we are to endure the discouragement that comes from living in a fallen world. As Proverbs 15:4 puts it, ***"The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life."***

Now---don't misunderstand me. Sometimes the kind of encouragement someone needs is loving CRITICISM. Being FOR someone---wanting them to succeed---spurring them on to good deeds---can include telling them painful things---if pain is the only way to bring growth. Sometimes encouraging words are "warning words," "reproving words," "confronting words," "admonishing words" ---because those are the kinds of words that benefit most. They're, the kinds of words that give us the courage to turn from sinful attitudes and actions. In any case, VERBAL encouragement is an important thing for Christians to learn to practice. But, there are other ways to encourage others---and that brings us back to our *"neighbor of the week"* because Barnabas was a Christ-follower who definitely lived up to his nickname---and not just by the words he used. His example shows us at least three ways we can be encouragers. The first is seen in how Barnabas encouraged his fellow church members---members of the church in Jerusalem. In these relationships Barnabas shows us that:

(1) Encouragers Give Freely of their RESOURCES.

Acts 4 tells us that Barnabas, ***"sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet."*** Now---at this point---the first church---the church in Jerusalem---was going through particularly discouraging times due to the persecution of the Jewish religious leaders.

These evil men did not want the crowd of Jesus' first followers to continue to grow. And one of the things they did to try and nip this movement in the bud so to speak was to find Christians and dismiss them from their jobs---depriving them of a way to make a living. This of course caused many believers to have a tough time financially. Some were unable to pay their debts.

Many were even going hungry. And at this moment---when insecurity was mounting among the believers---Barnabas went out and sold some property that he owned---and brought the money to the Apostles for them to use for the good of the people of his church family. He said in effect, *"Here, take this and distribute it to those people who are in trouble and in need. I have more than enough. I want this surplus to find its way to those whose faithfulness to Jesus Christ has caused them to have less than they need."*

Now, the Scripture says that Barnabas was from Cyprus. It also tells us that he was a LEVITE which means he would have owned no land in Israel itself. So, this land that he sold was probably on that island in the Mediterranean. And if it was, then his gift was lavish indeed. You see, to own land on Cyprus was like owning a city block in downtown San Francisco.

In any case, Barnabas' great generosity was VERY encouraging to that church. In fact, it set off a kind of chain reaction. His gift encouraged others to do the same and the writer of Acts seems to suggest that Barnabas' act of encouragement paved the way for one of the finest periods in the history of the church. For a while at least, no Christian was totally possessive or selfish about his or her wealth. They became a real "brother and sisterhood" --- a spiritual family---and gladly and generously made what resources they had available to each other according to need.

So, you see, Barnabas' life shows that you don't even have to be able to "speak" to be an encourager. You can PUT COURAGE INTO someone who needs it by simply sharing your material possessions with them---helping people with a physical need.

I can't tell you how many times something like that has happened here at RBC---times when a member has come to me and said something like, *"Here's some money---I know a fellow Redlander who is having a tough time. Give it to him. And keep this between me and you."* Or *"I just had a windfall---take this money and use it to help people in our church who are having a hard time. You decide how to distribute it."* I love when that happens! And so do the receivers of that kind of encouragement. It's a real shot in the arm!

The truth is that sometimes words just aren't sufficient to encourage someone. I mean when people are hungry or in physical need, telling them *"I'll be thinking about you."* isn't enough. Do you remember the words of James 2:15-16? ***"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well-fed,'---but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"***

So---if you want to encourage a neighbor, look for ways to do so by giving to meet their material needs. Look for ways to bless the people around you in a physical way. Ask God to help you see when you need to put some ACTIONS behind your encouraging words.

As most of you know a few decades back I was a chaplain in the Army Reserve. Part of my training involved going into the field with 90 other chaplains for a week of roughing it. And it was rough. The "field" was a forest in New Jersey and we camped there in the middle of January. We lived in unheated pup tents. It was VERY cold. I had a ground pad, a sleeping bag and two wool blankets and I still froze. Our meals were mostly MRE's---Meals Ready to Eat---with the occasional trips onto the base for a hot meal. It was hard---all day we'd march and learn to use a compass and attend classes where they taught us how to be a soldier. Then late at night we'd crawl into those tents for a few hours of shivering and at 5AM we'd crawl out and do it all over again. Finally, the day we were to break camp dawned. But when we crawled out of our tents, we discovered that it had rained a "winter rain" all night. Our tents were soaked---we were even more cold and miserable---and, eager to get out of that mess, we all struggled to gather our gear---without getting it wet and get everything on the truck.

One of our chaplains had struggled all week. He had a tough time on the obstacle courses---was frequently late to morning formation---fell asleep in classes---his uniform was always a mess---stuff like that. On that last morning his tent had fallen down---all his gear was soaked. He had "slept" wrapped up in a soggy sleeping bag. Most of us---and I confess I include myself---ignored him. We were too busy with our own gear to help him. There was sort of an "every chaplain for himself" mentality. I mean, in our haste to get back to the warmth and comfort of civilization we focused on our own issues. I imagine some told this poor soggy chaplain to "hang in there" but they did nothing to help him hang in there. All but one chaplain. Before he got his own stuff ready to load, he ENCOURAGED this guy by helping him get his stuff together. He grabbed his clothing and helped him pack his ruck sack. He rung out the poor guy's sleeping bag and got it secured. He helped him

with his tent. Only when this poor guy's stuff was secured and loaded---did he start getting his own gear together. His actions were VERY encouraging to that soggy chaplain---and encouraging to the rest of us---in a convicting way. I remember thinking he was the only one who lived up to the title "chaplain" that cold wet morning. Our commanding officer noticed what he did and gave him a special award for his selfless, encouraging actions. Well, this chaplain was a "Barnabas." He knew that encouragers give freely of their resources---whether that resource is money or something more valuable like our time and energy.

Let's move on.

The second neighboring lesson Barnabas teaches us is that encouragers:

(2) Believe in your potential.

We see this in the way Barnabas related to another one of his neighbors---a man named PAUL. At this point we need to do a quick review of what Paul was like BEFORE he became a Christian.

Acts 8 tells us that Saul, as he was known then, was a pharisee of pharisees---and was passionate about stomping out the Christian faith. Luke's exact wording is that when he saw what was happening in this new movement, he **"began ravaging the church."** I mean, SAUL had been one of the ring leaders of those who tormented the first followers of Jesus. But he had not satisfied himself with firing Christians---taking away their jobs. No, Saul had arrested them and had them whipped and imprisoned---he even collaborated in having Deacon Stephen stoned to death. Acts 9 says that Saul **"breathed threats and murder against the disciples."**

And then he got permission from the Jewish authorities to go to Damascus and halt the beginnings of the Christian movement there. But on that Damascus road, Saul ran head on into the risen Christ Himself, and discovered to his great astonishment that those he'd been persecuting were telling the truth. Jesus WAS in fact the Son of God---the long-awaited Messiah. As a result of that Damascus road experience, Saul became a follower of Christ himself. He in essence changed sides.

Okay---with that in mind, take your Bibles and turn to Acts chapters 9, verses 26-28 and let's see what happened next: **"When he (Saul) came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple."**

Let me stop and say that I can understand their concern. I can see why the day he *"walked down the aisle,"* asking to join the *"First Baptist Church of Jerusalem,"* Saul wasn't welcomed with open arms. Those Christians hated and distrusted Saul. They all had friends and family members who had been imprisoned or killed by this man. I'm sure they thought this walk down the aisle might be a subtle trick that Saul was playing---a ploy on his part to enable him to infiltrate the ranks of the church---so that he might find out who was part of the movement and destroy it from the inside. That old adage about a leopard not being able to change his spots must have entered the apostles' minds when Saul showed up---CLAIMING to be a Christian. And let's be honest---we have a hard time believing people who are known for doing bad things can change. Too many of us embrace sort of a one strike you're out kind of deal. We don't believe in the potential of some people.

Well, good old Barnabas believed in the power of the Gospel and so at this point in Saul's life he came to the rescue. As the next verse says, **"Barnabas took him (Saul) and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So, Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord."**

Understand, just as they were about to kick Saul out—at that crucial moment in Saul’s life, WHO should step in but Barnabas—Son of Encouragement—and begin to do his thing! He said in essence, “*You guys are wrong about Saul. He met our Lord on the Damascus road. He has placed his faith in Him. Saul has changed! I can vouch for him!*” At the risk of his own good reputation, Barnabas took this former persecutor and went around to all the Christians in Jerusalem---and put the weight of his influence behind the credibility of this new convert.

Later, because of the persecution in Jerusalem, Christians fled---and one of the places they went was the city of Antioch. The members of FBC, Jerusalem heard that a church had formed there started by those spiritual refugees---and that great things were happening. In fact, something brand new was happening in Antioch. GENTILES were coming to faith in Jesus!

Acts 11:22ff says, “***News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.***’

So Barnabas---true to his name---encouraged these new GENTILE believers---but things were going so well that he realized he needed help so it says: “***Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.***” Think of it! God used Barnabas’ encouraging words and actions to help the gospel to spread to non-Jews---and to teach this lesson to a former JEW of Jews--a Pharisee named Paul---who went on to be known as the “Missionary to the Gentiles!”

Well, in all this Barnabas teaches us that encouraging neighbors are the kind of people who don’t look at your reputation or your past. They have a wonderful ability to let the past be the past and to start fresh right where you are. They realize that none of us came to Jesus with an advantage. We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. And God has the power to give ANY one a new birth.

A modern-day example of what happened to Saul is Chuck Colson. When he first professed his faith in Jesus he was not accepted by the Christian community. It’s hard for us to believe that from OUR perspective. I mean this is the guy who founded *Prison Fellowship!* This is the man who wrote *Loving God* and *The Body*, and so many other amazing books.

But before all that---back before he came to Jesus---Colson had been Richard Nixon’s close assistant during his presidential campaign and his years in office. Colson was so ruthless in his dealings with people, he was frequently referred to as Nixon's “*hatchet man*”—the one who handled the president’s dirty work. One person described Colson by saying he’d run over his own grandmother. So---it’s not surprising that when Chuck Colson first became a Christian and confessed his wrongdoings that many believers doubted his sincerity. After he served his jail term and began his ministry, many Christians were skeptical. If it were not for those who knew the reality of Colson’s Christian experience and were willing to play a Barnabas role---Colson would have had a difficult time convincing people he was indeed a different man—a converted man. Thousands of people might never have been blessed by *Prison Fellowship*. We might not have Colson’s books.

And, in the same way, we might not have had half the New Testament if Barnabas hadn’t been there for Paul. If BARNABAS, the SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT hadn’t been willing to take a chance on what everybody else considered a risky possibility---we might not have had the greatest missionary in the history of the church---so far. He saw potential in Paul and acted on it.

You know, there are people who think the best of others and those who think the worst of others. As Christians we are called to join the first group—we are called to see GOD’S BEST in all people and urge them to pursue it. Think about it. There could be a PAUL or a PAULA here in our body—someone whom God has gifted to help us take the Gospel in places it has never gone before---and all he or she needs is a Christian to nudge them toward that God-given potential.

Maybe you have a Christian neighbor who is not involved in a church for some reason---and God needs you to encourage them to use his or her spiritual gifts in a local body of believers.

Perhaps you have a neighbor who believes that due to his or her actions or lifestyle God would never love them---and God needs you to encourage them to come to Jesus and experience the power of His amazing grace.

Barnabas has one more relationship with a neighbor and we can learn from it as well. It’s his relationship with a young man named John Mark.

(3) Here Barnabas shows us that encouragers are known for giving second chances.

Acts 12 tells us that after taking a financial gift to Jerusalem to help the believers there, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch---taking with them a young man named John Mark. But things apparently didn’t go so well. Acts 15 tells us: ***“Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord---and see how they are doing.’ 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.*** (38-41)

Let’s get a little background on John Mark. The first we hear of him is in Acts 12 when Peter was miraculously freed from prison. Remember? Peter went to the house where he knew the believers were meeting and knocked on the door. At that very moment they were inside praying for Peter’s release. God answered their prayers but remember---at first they didn’t believe it. When the person answered the door and told the rest Peter was there, they said, ***“You’re out of your mind! It must be Peter’s angel!”*** Peter kept knocking and eventually they let him in. Think of it---he had an easier time getting out of prison than into the house of his friends. The Bible tells us that this house was the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark. So, this tells us that John Mark was raised in a devout Christian home. We also know that John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas---which helps us see how he knew of John Mark’s potential.

Well, as we just saw, this mission journey with Paul and Barnabas was a tough one---too tough for young John Mark. He left the work and returned home to Jerusalem---and this made Paul unwilling to give him a second chance. But not Barnabas---He encouraged his cousin to try again---and this time John Mark must have done great because ten years later---Paul, in prison, wrote to the church in Colossae and in said, ***“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas. These are my only fellow workers for the kingdom of God; they have proved to be a comfort to me.”*** Six years later Paul is imprisoned a second and final time and in 2nd Timothy 4 he said, ***“Be diligent to come to me quickly. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you for he is useful to me in ministry.”***

Peter, who was given a much-needed second chance by Jesus---also encouraged John Mark. And remember, Peter was one of the guys who gave Barnabas his nickname! In 1st Peter 5:13 he writes and says, ***“She who is***

in Babylon (the church in Rome) greets you and so does Mark my son.” We also know that Peter was the verbal source for the first Gospel ever written, the Gospel of John Mark.

Think of that! How many countless millions have been led to follow Jesus because they read of His footsteps in this Gospel that John Mark put on paper. If tradition serves us well, John Mark went on to become the founder and bishop of the church in Alexandria, North Africa. John Mark was able to do all this because of encouragers like Barnabas and Peter---people who believed that God does give us second chances.

Have you ever wished you could have another chance—that the slate could be wiped clean? Have you ever day-dreamed and thought, *“If I could go back in time and re-live my life again, I wouldn’t do this and I wouldn’t do this or this...etc.”* I know I have—I think we ALL have. We’ve all messed up royally. The encouraging news is that God allows U-Turns in life. When we repent, He forgives us and empowers us to start again.

The Huffington Post ran a beautiful story about a church in Honolulu called Bluewater Mission. This small church started a restaurant called Seed, which gives people a second chance at work and at life. The article focused on a woman named Mary Nelson, who started working at Seed last year. It was only the second job the 53-year-old had ever had. You see, at the age of 14, Nelson’s mother committed suicide and Mary started working the streets of New York City as a prostitute. At the age of 18 she tried to start a new life in Hawaii but she kept working as a prostitute. Then when she was in her early 50s some Christians at Bluewater Mission persuaded her to leave the streets and try working at Seed. She spent the first six months washing dishes because she wanted to be far away from what she called, the “good people.” But after a lot of hard work and love from the people at church Mary says, “I get to be the person I was never able to be. I get to help people without someone trying to take advantage of me.” Mary shares that what she makes in a month at Seed, she used to make in one night on the streets. She had it all: new cars, jewelry, travel, nice condos—though, sometimes, beatings, rape and horror was part of the price she paid. She says, *“You can’t buy what I’m going through right now. I never thought that I’d be this person I am now.”* Recently, Nelson went with her church on a trip to the Philippines to reach out to prostitutes. She told the reporter, *“I want those women to know there’s hope. You can change. There are people out there that really want to help and you’ve got to tell them about the love of Jesus.”*

LET US PRAY.