

Do you have a nickname? It’s always intriguing to find out where nicknames come from; some are obvious and others, not so much.

Did you know there are even nicknames in the Bible? Look no further than the twelve disciples. You’ve got Simon, whom Jesus nicknamed “Petros,” the Rock (long before Dwayne Johnson came along). There’s James and John who were known as the Sons of Thunder. For better or for worse, we’ve hung a nickname on the star of today’s Gospel reading, you know, Doubting Thomas.

But just outside of that group of twelve, there is another nickname that deserves more attention than it gets. The man’s name is Joseph, but he’s called Barnabas. Why? Because of what he so often did. He built people up. He gave of himself to take care of others. He was a son of encouragement. That’s what Barnabas means. Joseph of Cyprus was an encourager. The news of Jesus’ resurrected life after death had changed him. By the power of a God who could overrule death, Joseph of Cyprus became an agent of encouragement. We know this by what he did.

First, Barnabas had some property, a field. We don’t know how big it was—how much he got for it—doesn’t matter. He came to see that God had given it to him to use wisely. So, he sold the field and gave the proceeds to the apostles. The money was used to help those in need in the church. The result: people were encouraged. Someone cared for them. Someone wanted to help. Someone was willing to give away what they had to make sure they had what they needed.

You know who else was encouraged? Those in the church who saw Barnabas do this. They were built up, and maybe challenged a little bit, by the fact that someone could be so generous. They, then, gave too. The book of Acts says that in the church at that time, no one was in need, because of the level of giving. Barnabas, changed by the risen Jesus, helped make that happen.

But that’s hardly all. Back when the Christian church had just begun, a man named Saul dedicated himself to attacking and persecuting it. But then he met the risen Christ on his way to Damascus, and the persecutor became the proclaimer. And that makes it sound very simple. But it wasn’t. Saul had earned a reputation among the early Christians. He was intimidating. When he showed up in Jerusalem, claiming that he had now switched sides, that he was now playing for Team Jesus, not everyone believed it. Can you blame them? We’d be wary, too.

You know who helped pave the way for Saul to be accepted by the apostles? Barnabas, the encourager. He spoke up for Saul. He vouched for him. He risked traveling with him. He put his reputation on the line for Saul. The persuasive encouragement of Barnabas was the launching pad for a ministry that changed the world. You know the how that turned out, right? God used Saul, who began to be known as Paul, to plant Christian Churches throughout the ancient world. Paul’s letters to those churches would eventually make up the bulk of the New Testament Bible. Paul’s preaching of Christ Crucified has made him one of the most prominent people in history. I probably don’t have to tell you there is a movie about his final days in theaters right now. But what if the son of encouragement had never spoken up? What if Barnabas doesn’t stick his neck

out for Saul? Who knows? What we do know is that Barnabas did, which set the stage for Paul to do his thing, and after their one mission trip together, Barnabas fades into the background, which he was probably more than happy to do. After all, there were other people to encourage.

So now that we are better acquainted with Joseph of Cyprus/Barnabas, the encourager, what do you think? What can we learn from this quietly influential follower of Jesus?

Here's one thing. Look at how grace leads to generosity. Barnabas gives out of what he's been given to care for people and advance the kingdom of God. He sells some of his property in order to fund the mercy ministry of the church. When we see generosity on this scale, it is encouraging, and also challenging, in a healthy way. How is it challenging? Well, simply put, generosity is fueled by a heart that treasures Jesus. Generosity is an outgrowth of a heart that is rooted in the gospel. Which means at least two things. One is that if you revel in the generosity God showed you in sending His Son to offer his life for you on the cross, if you treasure that, you will be generous in the way to respond to things, both spontaneously and in a planned-out sort of way. And the opposite is also true. If it is hard for you to be generous, then you may be resisting the gospel—you may have the right answers in your mind, but for some reason, you are keeping the generosity of God from settling into your heart. See, I told you it was challenging, and I'm not going to resolve it for you. Sometimes a challenge is exactly what is needed. Do you have the generosity of Barnabas? Don't you think that the generosity of Barnabas is an appropriate response to God's generosity? Doesn't Jesus' sacrifice deserve it?

What else can we learn from Barnabas? In him we see the life-affirming, stabilizing power of encouragement. I want to give you just a few moments of silence to think about a moment in your life when someone encouraged you in a powerful way. Just ten seconds or so. But think about a time when someone encouraged you in a way you can still remember.

OK. Hopefully it wasn't too hard to recall a time when someone truly encouraged you. And on a very basic level, I'm willing to bet that their encouragement at some point included words. Whether those were words that were spoken in person, or over the phone, or written down somehow, makes no difference. Now of course, sometimes just being there for someone is enough, and nothing needs to be said, but by and large, the encouragement that we remember, and take to heart, is based on a message. Which leads me to a few simple questions:

What can you learn about how to encourage others from the ways you have been encouraged?

Who is the first person to pop into your mind when you think about someone who needs encouragement? What do you plan to do; what can you think of to say to encourage that person?

Today we give thanks to God for a man who was nicknamed the "Son of Encouragement." I have a feeling he'd be uncomfortable with the attention, and would be very quick to point you to the one who was nicknamed "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." In that name, the name of Jesus, let's be generous and encouraging in a way that honors him.