

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Character Forged in Crisis

(Character sketches from Scripture)

A Crisis of Conviction

(A look at the life of Barnabas)

Study #5

Introduction: Think small...and big...

Jesus' mission is global. His gospel is for every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.

His commission is great, meaning *"Go everywhere, tell everyone, think big!"*

And His mission is local. His gospel is for each individual person. So, our assignment is to share Jesus at the granular level. One-on-one service in His Name.

After all, He made a hero out of the shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep all alone while looking for the one that was lost.

This morning, you and I are going to take a deep dive into the life of a man who was always on the lookout for the "one" to nurture, to help take a next step with Jesus, and to encourage.

Review...

Our summertime focus is on a few characters whose characters were forged and refined by God in crisis. God used hard times to form people of deep integrity, courage, and faith.

The people we've seen so far all lived in Old Testament times.

Daniel, Esther, Nehemiah, and Habakkuk all lived near, in, or shortly after the Jews were exiled to Babylon. They faced crises that forced them to relate to their changing world in fresh ways for God.

The people we will see going forward all lived in New Testament times, also in a time of great disruption and change when the church of Jesus was just getting established.

Setting the stage...

The book of Acts is our source for learning about those early years of Jesus' church. The book is well named because there is ACTION on every page.

Beginning with Jesus' final commission and His ascension into heaven, Luke told us about an ongoing prayer meeting of the early disciples. They were praying for the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

And, fifty days after Jesus' crucifixion, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit arrived with power. Peter preached a message and thousands of God-fearing Jews believed in Jesus.

Then, community developed as the disciples ***[Acts 2:42] were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.***

With all this wonderful progress, we meet a major player in the early church, who is the subject of our character sketch today.

Meet Barnabas

[Acts 4:36] Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), [37] owned a tract of land. So he sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

My suspicion is that Barnabas may have been among those who believed in Jesus on the Day of Pentecost when he listened to Peter's sermon.

And this first glimpse at Barnabas gives us a good sense as to who he is. He gave money to support needy people in the church at Jerusalem. So, he's wealthy and compassionate.

His act of generosity supports the nickname, "*Barnabas*." His financial assistance would have been encouraging to the whole church.

After this scene, Acts is silent about Barnabas for a while. Then, he surfaces to display an even gutsier kind of encouragement.

First a little background.

Getting to Know Barnabas

Barnabas, the Courageous Welcomer (Acts 9)

The [brief] backstory of Saul of Tarsus

Luke brings us into the story of Saul in (Acts, chapter 7) when we see him looking on approvingly while Stephen, the first man to die for Jesus, was being stoned to death.

When we see Saul again (chapter 9), he is on a rampage against Jesus' followers, arresting them, putting them in jail, and even having them killed. Saul was Enemy #1 of the early church of Jesus.

While he was on his way to the city of Damascus to arrest more Christians, just outside the city, he saw a blinding light and heard Jesus speak to him: **[Acts 9:4] "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"**

Jesus identified Himself to Saul, and then blinded him for three days and three nights.

Then, while blind and still in Damascus, a man named Ananias visited Saul. God had commissioned Ananias to go to Saul, and, essentially, welcome him into the body of Christ.

As soon as Ananias finished speaking, **[Acts 9:18]...something like fish scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized.**

Just like that, Saul turned from being the church's Enemy #1 to Jesus' #1 evangelist.

He shared Jesus with everyone he met in Damascus, to such an extent that he, the persecutor, began to be persecuted.

There was even a plot against his life by the enemies of the Gospel and Saul was rescued by believers in the city who put him in a big basket and lowered him to the ground outside the city's wall.

After his escape from Damascus, Saul walked the hundred-plus miles to Jerusalem, the birthplace of his new faith.

Understandably, he was not exactly welcomed with open arms.

Barnabas extends a risky welcome (vv. 26-27)

A nervous church (v. 26)

[26] When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.

It was in Jerusalem that Saul had approved of the stoning of Stephen, had attacked Christians, and had helped begin the persecution against Jesus' church.

So, we understand the members of the church being a bit standoffish toward him. The disciples didn't trust Saul.

They suspected him of working undercover as an agent for the High Priest, *pretending* to be a Christian so that he could lure believers into his confidence and then arrest them.

Of course, we know that was not the case. We know that Saul was a Christian and that he was hungering for Christian fellowship.

The disciples didn't know that. So, there was an impasse, a stalemate.

To break any impasse, there must be somebody who's willing to do something to open up a way forward.

Enter Joseph of Cyprus, *aka* Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement.

A courageous sponsor (v. 27)

[Acts 9:27] But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

Never was Barnabas more a "son of encouragement" than right here. And being that involved taking a gigantic risk, because...

- ...Saul might have been faking it.
- ...the reports from Damascus might have been false.

But Barnabas judged the upside possibility of welcoming a brother in Christ worth the downside risk of suffering a betrayal.

Barnabas' embrace of Saul was an act of extreme courage. And for that courage, he was rewarded with a very close and loyal friend.

This welcome of Saul by Barnabas was critical for both of their lives and for the expansion of Jesus' church, as we'll see.

In fact, much of the next several chapters of Acts could be labeled, "The Barnabas and Saul Show."

So, let's watch Mr. Encouragement and Saul "Bull-in-a-China-Shop" of Tarsus as they serve Jesus, together.

Barnabas, the Consummate Teammate (Acts 11, 13-14)

Bringing Saul from Tarsus to Antioch (Acts 11:19-26)

The church of Jesus began in Jerusalem and soon spread throughout Judea, into Samaria, and then beyond. (See Acts 1:8)

One of the key cities to which the gospel spread was Syrian Antioch.

A church was established there and when the apostles back in Jerusalem heard about the great things that were happening in the church, they sent someone from the Mother Church to check things out and to "**encourage**" the new believers in Jesus. (Acts 11:22)

[23] Then when [Barnabas] arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heat to remain true to the Lord; [24] for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and faith. And considerable numbers were added to the Lord.

Barnabas quickly saw that the teaching and disciple-making and shepherding work at Antioch was beyond him. He needed a partner - and he knew right where to go to find one.

Barnabas ***[25]...left for Tarsus to look for Saul.*** When he found Saul, he brought him back to Antioch where they served together in church leadership for a solid year, together.¹

I imagine Barnabas and Saul having the time of their lives together, teaching and preaching and evangelizing.

The Famine Relief visit (Acts 11:27-30)

Their partnership broadened when some men came to Antioch with sobering news.

Agabus, one of the prophets ***[Acts 11:28] stood up and indicated by the Spirit that there would definitely be a severe famine all over the world.***²

¹ Luke highlights the progress made in the church by pointing out that the believers in Jesus were first called "**Christians**" (Christ ones) in Antioch.

So, the church at Antioch decided to take up a collection to bring relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea who were going to suffer from this famine (which hadn't yet happened!).

They gathered up all that had been collected and sent it to Jerusalem...in the care of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:30)

That experience deepened their personal bond. And their partnership and friendship grew even deeper as they served Jesus together on the church's very first missions trip.

The First Missionary Journey (Acts 13-14)

The leaders of the church at Antioch (13:1)

This trip took place after the leaders of the church at Antioch had been worshipping the Lord together. Among these leaders were Barnabas (listed first) and Saul (listed last).³

The LEADER of the church at Antioch (13:2-4)

[2] While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set Barnabas and Saul apart for Me for the work to which I have called them."

The Spirit wanted Barnabas and Saul, two of the church's greatest resources, to leave the church for a season to spread the good news about Jesus.

When it was finally time to leave, the church held a special commissioning service and were sent out by the church and the Spirit to serve Jesus, again, together.

What a team! Barnabas, what a teammate!

² Something that did take place during the reign of Emperor Claudius. (11:28)

³ ***[Acts 13:1] Now there were prophets and teachers at Antioch, in the church that was there: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.***

All along the way, these two men made a great team. And not that Saul wasn't a great teammate, we especially see what an amazing teammate Barnabas was.

For one thing, he brought along John Mark, his relative, as a helper.

Barnabas knew the value of having mentoring relationships with younger Christians. (Remember how he had helped Saul...)

John Mark was younger and less experienced. So, he brought him along to give him ministry experience and to help him grow.⁴

Their first stop was on the island of Cyprus, which was Barnabas' home island.⁵

And, together, while on Cyprus, Barnabas and Saul shared Jesus with the Roman proconsul of the island, Sergius Paulus.⁶ (Acts 13:7ff...)

When they left Cyprus, they sailed for the mainland of Asia Minor. But listen to the way Luke refers to this team, now.

[13:13a] Now Paul⁷ and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia

Paul became the recognized leader of the team. Barnabas was evidently happy to sit in the second seat. Impressive teamwork.

Over a period of roughly a year, Paul and Barnabas traveled throughout the Galatian region together.

⁴ John Mark was the son of Mary, the woman who owned the home in Jerusalem where the prayer meeting was being held for Peter's release from prison. (Acts 12). In some way that is not made clear, Barnabas and John Mark were related.

⁵ Cyprus was known in the Old Testament as Kittim.

⁶ Rome had two types of provinces - those under the emperor and those under the senate. Judea was governed by procurators appointed by the emperors. In 22 B.C., secular history tells us that the status of Cyprus was changed from imperial to senatorial province, as Luke correctly indicates.

⁷ Referred to as Paul, the Roman form of his name, for the first time in Acts 13:9.

They stopped at major cities to share the Good News. They both shared with Jews in their synagogues and they both spoke on the streets with Gentiles.

Persecution forced both of them out of Iconium. Then, in Lystra⁸, Paul was nearly stoned to death. And then, again, together, they made their way to Derbe, to keep sharing the Good News.⁹

After finishing the trip, they made their way back Antioch, to the church that had sent them out, to report all that God had done in and through them on their trip.

I'm going to highlight one more episode in Barnabas' ministry partnership with Paul that highlights their close connection before getting to what I believe was Barnabas' crisis-of-a-lifetime.

Barnabas, Going to the Mat for the Faith (Acts 15:1-35)

Troubling teaching from Judea

While Paul and Barnabas were resting up from their first trip together, some men came from Judea to Antioch with a strange, new teaching.

Specifically, they taught, **[1]...“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”**

In other words, to be a Jesus-follower, you had to follow Moses. And this had never been taught in Antioch before.

It was directly opposite to the Gospel of Jesus, and it sure wasn't what Paul and Barnabas had taught as they shared Jesus with the Gentiles of Asia Minor.

⁸ In Lystra Paul was accused of being Hermes (spokesman), while Barnabas was referred to as Zeus. Both Barnabas (referred to here as an apostle) and Paul tore their robes at this identification.

⁹ They then re-traced their steps to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, strengthening the new believers, putting leaders in place in the new churches, and **[Acts 14:22] encouraging them to continue in the faith.** (Sounds Barnabas-ish)

Dissension in Antioch

These men had come from Jerusalem with a terrible teaching. But they weren't dealing with a bunch of shrinking violets.

Paul and Barnabas had faced rock-throwing crowds in Lystra and assassination attempts in Iconium. They weren't about to roll over for these supposed heavyweights from Judea.

When these guys said that all the Gentiles in the church at Antioch had to get circumcised and begin following the Mosaic Law, Paul and Barnabas stood up and said, *“No way!”*

The dissension between the two groups became so intense that the Antioch church... **[2b]...determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.**

Discussion in Jerusalem

This is what we call “The Jerusalem Council.” It was the very first council called to decide how to deal with a major issue facing Jesus' church. This Council was convened to decide what part the Law of Moses played in the life of a Christian.

We're not surprised that Paul and Barnabas played major roles at this Council.

Early on, they reported all that God had done through them on their missions trip. They made clear that the Law of Moses was NEVER a part of their Gospel presentation to Gentiles. (Acts 15:4)

Later, they told all about the attesting miracles that God had performed through them while they were with the Gentiles. (Acts 15:12)

Gospel truth, plain and simple

The upshot of the deliberations at the Council was an affirmation of the gospel according to Jesus, and according to Paul and

Barnabas, and a rejection of the Moses + Jesus gospel of the men from Judea.¹⁰

Thanks, in large part, to the stories of Paul and Barnabas, the Gentiles were declared free from circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, tithing, kosher-keeping, and any required observance of Jewish festivals.

And what better guys to deliver this encouraging news to the church at Antioch than Paul and Barnabas.

Good News deliverers (Acts 15: 22ff...)

When they got back to Antioch, the congregation, predictably **“rejoiced because of its encouragement”** (v. 31)

And Luke ends the narrative with this: ***[35] But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.***

However, after some time, Paul was ready to hit the road again.

A Crisis of Conviction for Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41)

Let's Hit the Road! (v. 36)

[36] After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”

We understand why he was so eager to check up on the new converts.

Another trip would mean another chance to tell them more about Jesus, urge them to stand firm against opposition.

¹⁰ Jesus' half-brother, James, told the men from Judea to stop annoying the Gentiles. (Acts 15:19) *“Let's not put the burden of Law-keeping on them that we Jews haven't ever been able to bear.”*

It seemed like a great idea. But, as the planning for a second trip commenced, a fly flew into the plans.

A Collision of Vision (vv. 37-38)

[37] Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. [38] But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

I didn't mention this earlier, but, on that first missions trip, just as the going got tough, just as they left Cyprus and headed toward the Asian mainland, John Mark had abandoned Paul and Barnabas. He went back home. The three became two. He left them high and dry.

Barnabas and John Mark were kin. Barnabas wanted to take his cousin along. Paul said, *“No way!”*

The disagreement between the teammates continued. It intensified. And this, I believe, was the crisis-of-a-lifetime for Barnabas.

The issue here is not, *“What will Paul do?”* Paul was the alpha leader in this partnership. If he didn't want John Mark along on this journey, John Mark wouldn't be going on this journey.

The question is, *“What will Barnabas do?”*

Barnabas was a fine leader, but he was less strident than Paul. He was the more easy-going one of the two.

Remember, he had been OK with being replaced by Paul as the team leader, when it changed from *“Barnabas and Saul...”* to *“Paul and his companions...”*

He was happy to let Paul be the main speaker in every city they visited.

Will he accept Paul's insistence that John Mark not join them on this trip? Will he go along to get along?

An Apostolic Break-Up (v. 39a)

[39a] And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another

The Antioch church's premier partnership dissolved.

Barnabas had shown himself to be amazingly adaptable and flexible over the years he and Paul had been together. He didn't flex here. He stood straight as a ramrod and ended his partnership with the Apostle Paul.

This relationship with Paul, strengthened, deepened, and broadened over years of nurture and shared experiences, shared sufferings, and shared victories and failures, he jettisoned.

He had this vision that John Mark could be a strong, healthy courageous servant of Jesus. Cutting him out of the next trip got in the way of that vision. So, he split with Paul over it.

That's the story. Now, as we close, let's look at some specifics from Barnabas' crisis that we can take away for our own next steps with Jesus.

Conclusion:

God's creative kingdom-expanding ways

First, let's notice that while the split up of Paul and Barnabas was sad, God turned it into a kingdom win.

On the one hand, ***[39b]...Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.***

I think that Barnabas intended for this voyage to Cyprus to be the beginning of a recovery trip for John Mark. Barnabas wanted to see his nephew restored to serve the Lord.

If that was the goal, well, mission accomplished. Because, over time, John Mark became very solid in Jesus.

We know that because he wrote the Gospel of Mark, which is the earthiest and the grittiest portrayal of Jesus as a Servant. We also know he became solid in Jesus because Paul later referred to him as ***"useful for service."*** (2 Timothy 4:11)

On the other hand, ***[40] But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.***¹¹

We call the journey that Paul and Silas took The Second Missionary Journey.

Notice what God did. He took the breakup of the team of Paul and Barnabas and multiplied Gospel impact by adding another missionary team.

The Bible doesn't take sides in this matter

Notice, too, that the Bible doesn't take sides in this matter. We never read, *"Paul got it right."* or *"Barnabas was right."*

There's no place for us to accuse Barnabas of being guilty of nepotism for wanting to take John Mark along. And there's no need to throw Paul under the bus for being unfeeling toward young John Mark.

Neither one violated a biblical command or principle. Neither one sinned. They were both motivated by love, even though they aimed their love in different directions.

Nor is there any proof of an angry fight. The Greek word that my version translates ***"sharp disagreement"*** has the sense of *irritation*.

Sure. They were both irritated. But it didn't get physical. It may or may not have gotten loud. It may not have even been ugly.

I am, personally, drawn to the idea that Paul and Barnabas remained friends after this.

¹¹ This is another way to phrase the church's commissioning of Paul and Silas.

In two passages written after the team break-up (1 Corinthians 9:6 and Colossians 4:10), Paul refers to Barnabas respectfully and warmly. And it is pure conjecture to say that they severed their friendship or that they never served Jesus together again.

Christians often disagree with each other about stuff. It is neither unusual nor unspiritual for Jesus followers to disagree about what are the best things to do and what are the best way to do things.

Let's accept that.

A major theme of the New Testament is Christian unity when there are differences of opinion. (Check out Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 10)

We are repeatedly told to accept one another even while disagreeing with each other where there is no, *"Thus saith the Lord."*

It is a mark of grace when we can grow toward being able to talk about our differences, learn from each other, respect each other, even when we irritate each other.

This morning, we've imagined the scene where Paul and Barnabas had their **"sharp disagreement"** and decided to separate.

Can you now imagine, a follow-on scene where these two men of God have cooled down. They are no longer irritated.

Barnabas speaks first.

"Paul, we've had some great adventures together. God has worked through us, together. I'm going to miss you. I'll be here to wave goodbye when you and Silas sail off. I'm going to pray that God's richest blessings go with you and that He protects you and uses you both for the advance of Jesus' Gospel."

Then Paul speaks.

"Barnabas, I thank God for how He has used you to help me grow as a Christian. Who knows where I'd be today if not for you. John Mark could have no better mentor than you. I'm praying that God will use you to bring him to maturity and that he will become that useful man of God I know he wants to be."

They express their love for each other, pray for each other, and commend each other to the grace of God.

We don't know what happened between Paul and Barnabas after **"they separated from each other."** (v. 39) But, that's my hopeful postscript.

It is also my prayer and hope that this will be the story and legacy of our church.

Now, let's look more closely at the break-up and what we can learn from it.

A takeaway from Barnabas' crisis of conviction

Paul was happy to partner with Barnabas as long as he could keep on going to new places and to people who had never heard the good news of Jesus.

Given what had happened before, when John Mark abandoned them, Paul didn't want the chance of that happening again. So, he said, *"No. He can't come along on this next trip."*

Barnabas was happy to partner with Paul in ministry, just so long as he could keep on being the encourager God crafted him to be.

And when Barnabas looked at John Mark at the end of that trip, I believe he saw someone who needed encouragement. I think he saw another Saul of Tarsus. So, he said, *"Yes. He must come along."*

The matter of taking or not taking John Mark highlighted that either Paul's passion for reaching the world OR Barnabas' passion to encourage one lost sheep would have to die.

They sharply disagreed about taking John Mark. They completely agreed that, given that disagreement, they would have to split up.

Barnabas stood firm, even to the point of breaking with a good friend and ministry partner, to do what was on his heart to do for God, to do what he had been gifted by God to do.

Barnabas was always the one who left the 99 to rescue the 1. For him to have gone on the second missions trip without John Mark would have been to act in misalignment with who God made him to be.

So, my friends, you be you. You do you, for Jesus.

Serve in the ways He has gifted you. In your family. In the community. Here at church.

Don't allow yourself to be pressured into serving where you don't want to serve.

Serve in the ministries where your heart stirs you to serve. Serve where you have passion to serve. Serve where you see a need that you want to meet.

Let everyone else here be and do themselves. And let's cheer each other on to do and to be all we can be for Him, together.