

The Ministry of Encouragement

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[0 : 00] Our sermon passage is from the book of Acts chapter 11 verses 19 through 30. You'll find it on page 920 of your pew Bible.

Before we read it though, I want to give a little bit of an introduction because you're kind of jumping in right into the middle of the book of Acts. I've been preaching through, Colin's been preaching through the Gospel of Luke on Sunday mornings.

Well, the book of Acts is part two to the Gospel of Luke. It's written by Luke as well. And it tells the story about how this group of Jesus followers starts to spread and take the Gospel forward to all of the Roman Empire.

And here's the key. It's how they do it. Power. Power. Not just any sort of power. Not their power. Power from the Holy Spirit.

And it's not just power from the Holy Spirit to do whatever they want. It's power from the Holy Spirit for a very specific task. To be witnesses. To bear witness to the good news of the risen and reigning King Jesus who sends His Spirit into His people's heart and is calling all peoples to Himself.

[1 : 18] And the passage that we're going to read is about the growth of the church in Antioch. When the beginning of our passage, Luke notes, it says, Now all those who were scattered because of the persecution of Stephen.

This is hearkening back to a few chapters before Stephen, the first deacons in the church, is stoned. And a persecution breaks out. So Christians have to kind of flee from Jerusalem.

But then it gives a qualification that these people who, as they go being persecuted, they are bearing witness to Jesus and what He's done.

But it says something different happens in Antioch. Because it says when they get there, they're only bearing witness to none except for Jews. You see, what you've seen right before in these chapters is that the Christian revolution has mostly been a Jewish revolution to this point.

So the gospel goes for it. They go outside of Jerusalem and you get the Samaritans. But the Samaritans are kind of like estranged cousins to the Jews. And then you get the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius who are Gentiles, but they're respecters and followers of the Old Testament Jewish faith.

[2 : 31] But something very different happens in Antioch. Is some unnamed Jewish Jesus followers go to what's called the Hellenists.

That means Greek speakers who are not Jews at all. And they start to come in and a church gets formed there. Not just any church.

I think we might be able to venture. We can talk about it later if you know things like this. It might be the most influential church in the history of the world. Because you see, it's out of this church that the Apostle Paul gets sent on his missionary journeys.

It's out of this church formed in Antioch that the world is radically changed. What happens? What sort of grace do we see and how does it actually grow in their lives?

That's what we're going to read about in verses 19 through 30 of Acts chapter 11. Listen up. This is God's word. Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

[3 : 39] But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them.

And a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.

For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. Now, in these days, prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world.

This took place in the days of Claudius. So the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

[4 : 54] This is God's word, it's completely true, and he gives it to you and me because he loves us. Let's pray as we come to the preaching of God's word. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would do two things simultaneously as we come and hear your word proclaimed.

First, would you break us of any idols in our own hearts? Would you challenge, confront, and exhort us by your Spirit, Lord? And secondly, we ask that you would stir our affections for Christ so that we would rest and rejoice in his love.

We ask this in his name. Amen. I brought all sorts of slides for you this evening, guys. I think we have a slide right here. Does anybody know what that is?

Venture any guess of where it might be? It's clearly a mountain. It's taller than any mountains in Scotland, so it's not from Scotland. This is Mount Mismi.

Mount Mismi is an 18,000-foot peak in the Andes in Peru. Okay, that's what it is. See, it's so tall it doesn't even fit on the screen, right? It just goes even above that.

[6 : 03] Next slide. Anybody know what that is? A little bit of water, a little trickle of water. Yes, yes, it is stones with water in front of somebody's mouth.

It's water, that's right. What this is, is a little stream from Mount Mismi. See, on top of Mount Mismi, you saw the snow-capped top to it.

On one side, water kind of, snow falls off, water falls off, and it goes and it flows into the Pacific Ocean. On the other side of Mount Mismi, pictured right there, that stream, that little bit of water goes down and it joins with other tributaries and things like that and forms the Amazon River.

The largest river in the world, not the longest, that's the Nile, but the largest river in the world, the Amazon River, which pumps out 200,000 liters of water every second.

And it all starts from that little bit right there. What you see going on in the book of Acts, you can take that down, you don't need to stare at the stream of water anymore.

[7 : 13] But what we see in the book of Acts, as we go through it, and particularly here in chapter 11, is that this small bit of witness and faithfulness by some unnamed, ordinary Christians, it doesn't give names to these guys, right, and women.

In verse 21, it says, Why?

Why? I said it at the beginning. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in God's people to be His witnesses. Verse 21, it says, The hand of the Lord was with these Christians, because they talked about the grace of Jesus.

And God works through a means. So the hand of the Lord is with them, and He's working through a means. And it's very interesting, I think, in this passage to see how God's grace is at work. We're a church. We like to talk about God's grace, right?

There's our outline. It's three things about grace. Three sorts of grace that you see here in this passage. Three things going on with grace. First thing, beholding grace. Second thing, beseeching grace.

[8 : 25] And then last thing, belonging grace. The alliteration there, if you care about that thing, stuff. Beholding, beseeching, belonging. First off, beholding grace.

Now, so Antioch at this time is the third largest city in the Roman Empire, only behind Rome and Alexandria. It's a big metropolitan city full of all sorts of different sorts of people from all over the world.

And what happens is word gets back to Jerusalem that something amazing, something different is happening in Antioch. Verse 22 says that the church in Jerusalem, they're like, hey, what's going on?

Oh, that sounds cool. Some of the Gentiles are coming into the church. We need to check this out. And so they commissioned Barnabas, and they send Barnabas up north to Antioch to see what's going on.

Barnabas, you've met him actually earlier in Acts chapter 4. Barnabas is this guy who's super-duper generous. His real name is actually Joseph, but he sells a field, and he donates all of the proceeds of selling that field to the church in Jerusalem.

[9 : 35] And he's such an encourager that they give him this nickname, Barnabas, which means son of encouragement. He's like, Mr. Encouragement here, right? That's what Barnabas is.

And Barnabas not only does that, you see him later when Saul is converted. It's Barnabas who takes him under his wing and brings him into the church and vouches for him, right?

It's going on through the ministry of Barnabas. Our passage, it describes Barnabas in verse 24 as a good man. He's not good because he's like a natural optimist, because he was generous in the past.

That's not what it's referring to. It qualifies. Why is he a good man? It says right after that, it's because he was full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. God's grace has been poured into Barnabas, and it flows out of him.

That's what makes him a good man. So it's no wonder, verse 23, Barnabas arrives in Antioch, and it says this, he saw the grace of God and was glad.

[10 : 45] He saw the grace of God and was glad. Barnabas came, he shows up in Antioch, and he beholds grace. What sort of grace is it? Well, I think maybe first we can even answer it as to point this out.

Simple point, but I think it's important. It's this, that God's grace should be observable. He comes and he looks and he sees God's grace is at work. God's grace, it changes lives.

If it's not, if God's grace isn't at work in a church, that means there's a group of people resisting God's grace. God's grace doesn't come and leave you content with the status quo.

God's grace pushes in and it changes lives. Slowly, often like a little trickle down a mountain. But it changes it.

It's moving. And the grace that Barnabas sees is this diverse family of people. All of a sudden there's this group of people, unlike anything the world has ever seen, coming together.

[11 : 43] So let me just apply this quickly. If you're at a loss for what to talk about at Sunday lunch or at the dinner table throughout the week, here's a question you can ask.

How have you seen God's grace at work lately? It's a great conversation topic. How have you seen God's grace at work? In your own life? In your family's life? In your church life?

In your city group? How have you seen God's grace at work? That's why we come and we want to update you on what's happening in Crossbridge. To talk about God's grace. That's what we want to be about.

And let me be clear. God's grace is not merely what saves you in the past, but it's also what is presently at work in your life. It's God's grace that sustains us through trials.

It's God's grace that teaches us dependence, that helps us in difficult relationships, that presses us deeper into intimacy and communion with God. So how is God's grace at work in your life?

[12 : 46] In your church's life? Ask this. And not just ask it, can we see it? Do we have eyes to see it? Do we have eyes to see it?

And listen, there's no way. When it talks about the church in Antioch, I don't know about you, sometimes I come to these places and I'm like, oh, that's awesome. Sounds like the best church. Were they perfect? Perfect?

Obviously not, because they needed God's grace, right? But second, they needed the greatest discipler in the history of the world to come and help them, and Paul, right? They're not a perfect church.

But before any of that happens, they need some help, and Barnabas beholds God's grace. Now, let me just say this, because again, this is probably a personal confession. You know, my natural inclination of, like, personality, when I see problems and things.

Oh, this could go wrong, or this could go wrong. Oh, and this is, you know, this is my gift to everybody. Here's the ten problems that could go wrong with this. And we need people like that, he assures himself. But that's just easy, right?

[13:51] It's easy to be cynical. It's easy to find faults. You don't need to be full of the Holy Spirit for that. But do we have eyes to see God's grace? God's grace meets us and starts to work before we are mature in faith, right?

Because God's grace actually matures us in faith. So to say that means God's grace is at work before you are mature and continue to mature. This is a key thing.

To be able to behold God's grace is key in raising up new leaders. Because somebody has to mature in the faith. People don't come as finished products. But can you see God's grace at work? And not only see God's grace at work, but come alongside people and nurture that grace. And celebrate that grace. And encourage people. People aren't using their gifts.

If people aren't being stretched to grow in their faith. If people aren't responding to God's grace. There's big problems in a church. But if those things are going on, as imperfect as they may be, well then let's celebrate.

[14:55] Why? Because the Holy Spirit is at work. It would be like, parents don't rejoice over their children only when they become like teenagers or adults, right?

If you have a little child, a baby, as they start to stand up, you celebrate that. As they start to take their first steps, you celebrate that. It would be a really weird thing. I hate to break it to you. You're not a good parent if your child takes their first steps and you're like, yeah, come back when you can do a bicycle kick of the football, you know?

No. And you celebrate those steps. The same way we celebrate those steps in each other's lives. Because that's God's grace at work. Small steps.

And what's always going to get in the way of this in our own lives and the lives in our church is jealousy and envy. And we know when we realize that we're resisting God's grace in our life, and it kind of makes us feel incapable of celebrating it in other people's lives, right?

Can you see God's grace? That's the first thing that happens in the church in Antioch. Barnabas gets there and he beholds grace. Second thing that we see is beseeching grace. Beseeching grace.

[16:10] Oh, I skipped ahead too far. Hold on. Go back another minute in the sermon. I should have said this too. When Barnabas comes and he sees, what sort of grace is at work? What is the grace that he sees? He sees this.

It's just ordinary Christians sharing their faith. That's what he sees. It's not Paul there. It's unnamed Christians sharing their faith. So if I could ask you, which would you pick?

If you had to pick between the two, the greatest preacher in the UK or a bunch of ordinary Christians who love Jesus and want to share their faith? Which one would you choose?

Can't have both. If you had to choose one, I think it's a no-brainer. I think you always, always pick people who love Jesus and are full of his grace and want to share Jesus.

We need good preachers. I'm not trying. You know what I'm saying, right? You want that too. And that help feeds into that. But what you want in a church, it's not just up here that God's grace gets proclaimed, but that it gets poured into people's lives and they see it going out and bearing fruit.

[17:17] Right? Sorry. Second thing we see is beseeching grace. Well, where do you see this? So in verse 23, Barnabas, you know, he comes to Antioch. He sees the grace of God at work.

It makes his heart glad. And his response is to exhort them all to remain faithful to the Lord. So here's what's going on. You see, verse 21, it says, a great number were converted and joined the church.

Right? And then verse 24, a few verses later, after old Barney arrives, he sees, he exhorts, and what's the result? What happens? What does it say? A great many people were added to the Lord. A great many people were added. Barnabas comes. A great many people were added. Right? So God's at work. He's using ordinary Christians in their witness, talking about God's grace. Barnabas shows up, and he has this unique ministry, and it's like this catalyst to explosive growth in the church in Antioch.

So what was it? He came and preached a lot of awesome sermons, right? Right? He did all the discipleship on his own.

[18:19] Nope. He had to get Paul to come do that. Right? So what was it? What does Barnabas do? He does this. He exhorts them. He exhorts the church in Antioch.

If you look in other Bible translations, they'll translate that word in different ways. It'll be encourage, exhort, urge, entreat, admonish, beseech. I chose beseech because of alliteration, right?

But it's this word, it's this Greek word, parakaleo. Parakaleo. And I was reading one Bible study some months ago, and it said, you know, it has this unique thing that it brings together of being both forceful and tender at the same time.

So within that, parakaleo, para means to come alongside, right? A paramedic, a paralegal, they come alongside, they help, right? But then it's paired with the word kaleo, which means to call out. So that's, you're urging, you're exhorting, you're saying, hey, keep going, and yet you're coming alongside at the same time. So what happens isn't that, you know, the church sends Barnabas and Paul together, and they play good cop, bad cop.

[19 : 29] No, it's just Barnabas, son of encouragement, Mr. Parakaleo, and in that word, what you see encapsulated is speaking the truth in love, speaking the truth in love.

So Barnabas comes, and he sees God's grace at work, and he celebrates it, and he's glad for it, and he comes alongside, and he puts his arm around them, and he says, isn't this great? This is what God is doing. This is what Jesus promised to do, and also, he doesn't go, well, let's have some cake and like, you know, leave.

He says, no, keep going. He urges them to remain faithful. Keep pressing, don't turn your back on this. This isn't the end of it. Keep going, keep going. That's what Barnabas comes and do, and this is the thing.

This is what you and I both need in our lives in order to grow in grace. We need other people in our lives to have a Parakaleo ministry, to come alongside, and to call out at the same time.

Not to be such people pleasers that we only ever affirm each other, and not to be so impatient that we only offer easy solutions without listening and caring for people.

[20 : 38] I mean, listen, we all have defense mechanisms to self-justify, so, you know, if you're a person who's like quick to critique, don't worry, I've got something in store ready to swat that critique away like a house fly.

On the other hand, if people only affirm and encourage us, it only keeps the status quo in our lives, because change is scary, right? It's easier to stay in the same place. So without people who are around who are willing to speak the truth in love, we don't usually change.

And I probably venture to guess most of us kind of lean towards one or the other. I love the truth. I just say it how it is. Oh, I just love love, right? I'm an encourager.

I come alongside. But we need both in our lives. And what enables Barnabas to do this ministry? Verse 24.

He is full of the Holy Spirit. Now, when Jesus, in the upper room, when he's talking to the disciples in John 14, he says he's going to send another helper.

[21 : 43] And the Greek word there is paraklete. Paraklete. It's the noun form of the Greek verb parakaleo. Holy Spirit has a parakaleo ministry. Another helper, the paraklete.

The Holy Spirit brings us into relationship with Jesus. All of the benefits of Christ get applied to our life through the Holy Spirit. He reminds us of who we are in Christ and what Jesus has done, and that he's with us right now.

Now, John 14, 17, Jesus also says the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth. John 16, he says that the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin. The Holy Spirit isn't there just to pat you on the back and be like, there, there.

You're okay. Coming along, encouraging, reminding, pouring Jesus' grace into our life, but also speaking the truth in love.

The Holy Spirit declares to us what is Christ's that is ours. In John 16, 13, it says the Holy Spirit guides us to truth. A guide is with you.

[22 : 43] A guide is there. They're walking alongside of you, but also a guide isn't doing their job if they let you go off the path. They do everything they can to bring you back on the path. So here's my question.

Wouldn't it be great if you had a church full, not of the Apostle Paul, but of Barnabases, Barnabai? Every church needs a Barnabas, multiple Barnabases, to have this ministry of encouragement, to be a parakaleo church.

Here's the thing. You don't need to be big. You don't need to be fancy. You just need the Holy Spirit. Maybe the first step for a lot of us to apply this is to find somebody this week to encourage. There was a minister in London who I thought he gave really good advice on encouragement. He says, make it genuine. Genuine, okay? It's not encouraging if it's not true. Encouragement isn't to

tell a lie.

Make it genuine. Second, they make it specific. I think you're brilliant. That doesn't really do it. Say exactly what does it look like, God's grace being at work in that person's life. And then last thing, make it God-honoring.

[23 : 49] We're not here to swell people's egos. We're here to remind them that the Holy Spirit is real and at work, and we can see it. So Barnabas, he beholds God's grace.

He comes and he beseeches them with God's grace. Last thing I want to see is a belonging grace. I just kind of love Barnabas' humility in this because he comes, he's got this key ministry, but he's not content to make it all about himself.

Because ministry is about Jesus and he wants people to have more of Jesus. He goes and he finds the best person that he possibly can to teach people about Jesus. So he goes off to Saul, who's been out in the desert doing who knows what for like 10 plus years, right?

There's this huge part of Paul's life that we don't know about. Barnabas goes and he finds him because he knows Paul's and he brings him back and he says, here, come and teach. Barnabas is willing to get out of the way because he wants people to get more of Jesus's grace.

He's willing to step aside and let someone else shine. He embraces team ministry. And what's interesting, there's these few verses at the end of chapter 11.

[24 : 56] We start to see how the church in Antioch sees that they belong because of Jesus's grace, right? They start to see how they belong. So there's this prophet Agabus who stands up and says a famine is coming.

I think it's around like 45 AD. The Nile River floods and it ruins all the grain crops. And so there's a famine in the Roman Empire. And he says to prepare for this.

And verse 29 says that these Christians in Antioch, these disciples respond by giving their money to the brothers in Judea. Isn't that an interesting word?

This guy's in Antioch. You want to give to the brothers in Judea. Now here's the thing. They've met Barnabas because he's come up. He's been sent by the church from Jerusalem. They don't know anybody else.

What do they refer to him as? Our brothers. And that's one thing if the Jewish Christians, those who were there around Jesus and saw all those things and were there from the beginning said that.

[25 : 56] But here's a group who's on the outside. But they realize something. Because they belong to Jesus, they've received the same grace as the church in Jerusalem. And because they share in that grace, they can share their resources.

We're not competing in God's kingdom for a limited amount of resources. What I said earlier when we're giving an update, you've already seen because of your sacrifice how God's grace is at work in our church plan.

I'm so thankful for God's grace. Not just in my life, but I see teenagers coming and interested. It's wonderful. It's wonderful.

Starting to realize something about what it means to belong to a community of people. And you and I, we belong to Jesus together. Where does this all flow from in the church in Antioch?

Verse 26, Luke notes that in Antioch, it's the first time that followers of Jesus are called Christians. Christian means little Christ. It was probably started as a sort of pejorative term to make fun of them.

[27 : 06] Oh, you follow Christ? You're like a little Christ. Kind of like Puritans. It wasn't a nice term at first. It's like, oh, you're so pure, right? But that word fits because their life is shaped by Christ.

And all of a sudden, Jew and Gentile are coming together and the Jews are being persecuted by their own and they need food. And the Gentiles, you know, they're leaving behind idols of their culture and they are looking and they're like, hey, we actually belong together.

This name of Jesus is inscribed on them. In Numbers chapter 6, it's the Aaronic blessing, the same thing you use at the end of the worship service sometimes, the Lord bless you and keep you, right?

The very end after that, God says this. He says, so shall they, that means the priests giving the blessing, put my name upon the people of Israel. By doing that blessing, you're saying, God's saying, I'm putting my name on my people.

To have God's name put on you means you know who you are and you know where you belong. Ever seen the movie Toy Story?

[28 : 16] It had a long time, guys. It came out in like 1994, okay? In Toy Story, it tells the story, it starts out, you know, this little boy named Andy, his favorite toy is Woody.

And Woody loves being loved by Andy if on the bottom of his cowboy boot, it says Andy's name. But what happens? Andy gets a new present, Buzz Lightyear.

And all of a sudden, Andy starts to play with Buzz more and Woody's kind of mad about it, but all sorts of things happen. And Woody, he doesn't like Buzz and he wants him to know you're a toy. Stop acting like you're a space ranger. You're just a toy. He says, you're a child's play thing, right? And later on in the movie, Buzz finds out he's not a real space ranger.

He's just a toy. And he's absolutely dejected. He says, I'm not a space ranger. I'm just a stupid, insignificant little toy.

[29 : 15] And Woody, who's kind of had a change of heart, he says, whoa, whoa, wait a minute. In that house over there, there's a kid who thinks you're the greatest. Not because you're a space ranger, but because you're a toy.

His toy. Buzz turns his foot and he sees written on the bottom of his foot, Andy. Andy's name.

You see, Jesus, the Savior who's shown us grace, doesn't just leave us alone. He puts his name on us. And it tells you that his grace has been at work in your life.

And it's a grace that secures you. And means you belong. And it means that you are his. Thanks be to God. Thank you.