The background of the page features a silhouette of a golfer and a caddy on a rocky cliff. The golfer is on the left, leaning forward as if preparing a shot, while the caddy stands on the right, reaching out to assist. The scene is set against a bright sunset sky with the sun low on the horizon over the ocean.

# The Barnabas Legacy

**IMPROVING AS  
ENCOURAGERS**

**S**tandard practice in the pre-shot routine between player and caddie on tour ends with positive words from the one on the bag. Sometimes these are brief instructional words, along the lines of, "Fully committed now." Other times you will hear the two discuss a club choice, then the player will describe his shot and the caddie will offer a vote of confidence: "I like that."

You might think of these caddies as only bag carriers or umbrella holders and ball cleaners, but these are just the mundanities of their job. Where they can really help their player strike the ball well is in the words they say, in how well they encourage.

Long-time Links Players region director Randy Wolff, who assists Links Fellowships in Texas, Louisiana, and Colorado, has surrounded himself with a group of supporters who help him focus on the key aspects of his ministry. He calls this group his Barnabas team.

Barnabas, you may already know, was a prominent figure in the New Testament. Though not an apostle, Barnabas' presence in the book of Acts made him as famous as other "second line" disciples, such as Luke and Mark and Priscilla and Aquila. They showed up on multiple occasions, both in Acts and in Paul's letters to the local churches.

**ARTICLE BY LINKS DAILY DEVOTIONAL EDITOR JEFF HOPPER**

**W**hen Barnabas is first introduced, however, we are given his lesser known name, the one his parents gave him: Joseph. But immediately the text (Acts 4:36) tells us that the apostles called him Barnabas, and that is the only name he goes by throughout the rest of the Scriptures. Why did they call him this? Because Barnabas, a name that literally meant “Son of Encouragement” in the Hebrew, knew how to lift others up with the things he said and did.

Not long ago, I sat with several men and asked them each to tell us what the most encouraging thing someone could say to them in that moment, as they considered specific things going on in their life. Eventually we got to these answers, but it turned out that we had to first clear a hurdle, because the initial words to come from one of these men were these: “I am very uncomfortable with encouragement. The instant I hear it, I feel myself swelling up with pride.” For Christians, this is a legitimate concern; we all know how pride can damage our relationship with God. But of equal concern to me in that moment was that this man’s words suggested that some people at least are afraid of a practice we are called to engage in: encouraging one another.

My response to this one man was that he may be confusing different forms of encouragement. As we recognized in the player-caddie scenario at the outset of this article, encouragement can come in more than one variety. Some require practice to give, and some require care in receiving.

So I would like to walk you through several types of encouragement and consider with you how we might render these and how we might receive them, because if there is one thing we know about Barnabas it is that he is someone to emulate, not someone to shy away from.

### **Affirmation**

A common and simple form of encouragement is affirmation. It recognizes a job well done and offers some cheery words in response. If a child does a somersault, we might laugh and say, “That was great!” That’s all a child really needs, especially when it comes to something as playful as a somersault. If they never do another one, it’s not a big deal.

On the golf course, if our newbie playing companion finally hits one in the center of the clubface, we might also say, “That was great!” It feels good to hear those words (though

not as good as the shot itself!). But what your friend really wants to know is, *How did I do that?* She would like to be able to do it again, and a simple affirmation doesn’t take her to that next level.

The same disconnect can occur in the context of creative or ministerial work. When a pastor is approached after a sermon and is told that his message was “excellent,” it may be a compliment, but it leaves the pastor guessing. The same can be true for an artist. Because such work is multi-layered and the experience of each listener or viewer is subjectively filtered, a simple affirmation can bring trouble. Because the

When Barnabas 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.  
**ACTS 11:23-24**

artist is left to guess what part of her work, say, is excellent, she may fill in the blank and—unbeknownst to either—completely miss the aim that the compliment-giver had intended. Moreover, when a creator is left guessing, he may puff up with pride. There is danger in this even on the surface, because in the range of subjective observations a mother’s “excellent” after seeing the dance performance of her child may be a long way from the “excellent” a dance instructor might give the same performance. The greater danger as always with pride, though, lies in our hearts, where we may begin to think that we have really arrived or consider ourselves better than others on the basis of a few general words.

When we encourage with affirmation, we need to twice caution ourselves. First, we should not be lazy in our encouragement, using pithy superlatives too often and without recognizable application. Second, we need to consider the context. Using affirmation at play may be plenty, but using it at work may not be nearly enough. We say “nice shot” on the golf course when the ball stops close to the hole, but we might never say the same thing when helping a friend on the range, where his shots, though straight, demonstrate a random collection of thin contact, mild slices, or balls so high the wind would whisk them away.

On the other end, when we receive affirmation, we may say thank you as we do with all encouragement. But we might also do well to press for a bit more specific wording. “I’m glad you liked it,” we might say if someone tersely affirms a report we have written for a task force at work. Then we can ask, “Is there anything in a particular that especially caught your attention?” We can even add a humble invitation if appropriate by saying something like, “I’m still polish-

ing this work, so if there is something you saw that may need extra attention, let me know.”

## Appreciation

A second form of encouragement is appreciation. This is often delivered as a thank you. Consider again our pastor standing at the back of the sanctuary after Sunday services. You may offer a vague affirmation (“that was great”), but another step forward could sound like this: “Thank you, Pastor, for your work in preparing this week’s message.”

Again, there may be no specific reference in such encouragement, but it does leave the pastor with something tangible to respond to. “You’re welcome,” the pastor can say, grateful that you understand that he has demonstrated commitment to his calling in the week leading up to Sunday morning.

As one who has coached youth and high school sports for nearly 20 years, there have been times when I have worked with unskilled players with little background in the sport. They may go a whole season with little opportunity for me to affirm the results of their work. But I can appreciate the work they put in. Some players practice hard and long before they get noticeably pleasing results, especially in golf.

Now here’s a bit of magic: appreciation also carries with it affirmation. When I thank you for the work you have put in, I am also affirming that work. You are encouraged to keep going in that work. This is even truer when I identify certain actions. No one loves the repetition of foundational drills, for instance, but when I thank someone for doing that skill-building work and sticking with the process, that person is far more likely to keep at it.

When we receive appreciation, we can thank a person in return for paying close attention. We may even honestly say, “I am often challenged to keep going when the work is mundane or when I feel like no one is paying attention, so I am grateful that you took the time to say that.” And again we may guard against pride, this time by praying, “Lord, here is a person to whom my diligence made a difference. Sustain me even on the hard days, so that others may be blessed next time.”

## Identification

A third way to encourage others is by identification. We

might call this a drilling-down of encouragement, because we use a detailed observation to offer specific support.

I once had a high school golfer who drew the attention of another coach because of the way he dressed and carried himself. “He looks like nobility,” this coach would say. What he meant specifically was that this boy pressed his shorts, wore a leather belt and shoes, and walked erect and with purpose. Interestingly enough, this boy was not a very good golfer and his shirt often came untucked because of the insulin pack he had to wear to keep his diabetes in check. But these other details caught this coach’s attention, and I made

sure I passed these specifics on to this player and to my others, encouraging good practice by identifying it.

This kind of encouragement works in any context, and it is a good habit of encouragement to develop if you are recognized as skillful in that context. This is because people recognize you as one who can pick out the fine details. So if as an excellent singer you say to someone who is developing the skill, “That was nice,” you’ve come up somewhat short when you could instead say, “I love the way you hit the notes at the end of each line of the chorus of that song.” If you are a business leader, your mentorship of budding practitioners is strengthened when you identify specific successful practices

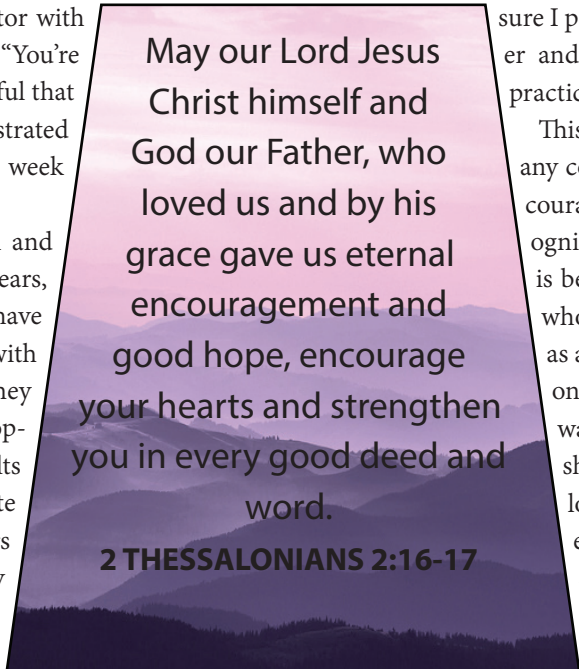
that will contribute to a bright future for the person you are encouraging.

When it comes time to receive identification, you can thank the encourager and say something like, “That is exactly the kind of specific encouragement I need. I want to keep working on that little skill and add some more to it.” You might even ask in humility, “What do you suggest I work on next?”

## Instruction

By now you may be recognizing levels in these forms of encouragement. While this is not an altogether accurate assessment, it has merit, for there are appropriate times and places for each of these kinds of encouragement. There is also an importance to the balance of using all different kinds of encouragement.

But as we move to our fourth variety of encouragement, we should see an increasing value as we apply instruction over and above affirmation. And yet we must be careful, be-



May our Lord Jesus  
Christ himself and  
God our Father, who  
loved us and by his  
grace gave us eternal  
encouragement and  
good hope, encourage  
your hearts and strengthen  
you in every good deed and  
word.

**2 THESSALONIANS 2:16-17**



cause our final two methods of encouragement bring with them the important requirement of relationship (or at least what we will call voluntary receipt).

If I am learning to play golf, I will likely find that there are any number of people who would be willing to “help” me with my game. But let me explain an important principle by way of illustration. A number of years ago, I worked alongside Rik Massengale, a professional who won three times on the PGA Tour. By this time, Rik had retired and we were engaged in ministry together, but our ministry took us to the golf course. Once we were playing together and I was struggling that day. At the end of the round, we played a few extra holes for fun and he mentioned something that he had noticed in my swing. I asked him, “Why didn’t you tell me during the round?” He replied, “I didn’t hear anybody ask.” Our relationship was such that I would have loved Rik’s expert help, but he deferred to the principle of voluntary receipt; he wasn’t going to try to give me something until he knew I wanted to receive it. We might say it this way: your friend may not want you as a mentor.

When it comes to instruction (and our final form of encouragement, exhortation), it is critical that there is an understood mentor-mentee relationship. We may not call it this exactly, for teacher-student or professional-golfer would also qualify. But if we are going to encourage by instruction or exhortation, we want to know our hearer has “ears to hear.” When I was being treated with radiation for a tumor in my neck, I sat in the waiting room one day with a disheveled fellow who was there for prostate cancer. A talker, in one moment he told me about the church he was attending and in the next he was lamenting that this radiation would kill his chances of having sex with the girlfriend he lived with. I thought, *This is a man who probably doesn’t volunteer to hear the instruction of the church leader he calls “pastor.”*

But now that this principle is clear, we can see the value of instruction as a form of encouragement. If I truly want to get better—with a specific skill, say, but more importantly as a person always growing in my faith walk with Jesus—I need the specific instruction of one who has gone before me or studied what I have not. I can be well encouraged in doing something by being told just how to get it done. I want to get better, so if you have something to offer me that will help

me improve, that is a real encouragement to my desire and my efforts.

The best instructional encouragers do not have to be professionals. Often they are people who are just a few steps ahead of us. They have gone through things we are about to face. It has been noted that the very best athletes rarely make good coaches. This is because they have forgotten—or never experienced!—the struggles of the rookie or the amateur. The best instructors, then, are simultaneously knowledgeable and humble. They are giving you what they have to give while keeping in mind your limited understanding and lack of practice; that is, they maintain your dignity even though

they are, in a way, above and beyond you. To be this kind of encourager you have to understand and value people, and for most of us that takes work. In other words, the higher levels of encouragement demand much from us.

To receive instruction, as we have already suggested, is somewhat different, because we have normally acquiesced before the instruction is given. But if we are humble and willing to listen, we may also find that we can receive helpful input even when we haven’t asked for it. In either case, our best reception comes with gratitude and an invitation for more of the same at a later time.

The Lord gave me authority  
for building you up, not for  
tearing you down. Finally,  
brothers and sisters, rejoice!  
Strive for full restoration,  
encourage one another, be  
of one mind, live in peace.  
And the God of love and  
peace will be with you.  
**2 CORINTHIANS 13:11**

## Exhortation

The final method of encouragement is what the Bible calls exhortation. We might define this as “encouragement with urgency.” While it may be excessive physicality for a father to yank his young child firmly by the arm, lifting the child off the ground and swinging him into position for a harsh bawling out, we would not view this similarly if the father were saving his child from an onrushing car. The same intensity is interpreted differently according to the context.

While having our ear chewed for some slight error is never anybody’s idea of fun, it may be just what we need to hear if our actions are leading us toward grave spiritual danger. In the original Greek, the idea of exhortation actually includes many different possible tones: admonishment, comfort, instruction, or begging. But all come with an emotion that carries the words of the speaker, saying in essence, “This is important. It needs to be dealt with swiftly and pointedly.”

Athletes do not like being berated any more than you or I

do. But this is not as true in a practice game as it is in competition. A runner who is making her way through a race may have her lap times called out in a rather flat fashion, but when it comes to that final turn, what she really wants is to be exhorted to the finish line: “Go! Go! Go!”


As one who would give exhortation, you do need to recognize the spirit of the receiver. Though urgency may be vital, the tone should be appropriate to the context. “Go and sin no more,” for instance, would be spoken differently to a person who is already contrite and needs a final push toward change than it would be spoken to a person who in rebellion is harming himself or others through stubborn sin. You must also be aware that exhortation is more likely to be received and acted upon when the listener respects the exhorter. If you know someone who needs exhortation, you should not shirk the task if it is yours to do, but you might also recognize that it is better to approach someone else about doing the job because you know their words would stand a better chance of being properly received.

Finally, if exhortation comes your way, you will need to be in the right frame of mind to receive it, because it can seem like an affront. In fact, it may be best to regularly pray that you would be sensitive to correction and exhortation whenever it comes at you. This way, when a friend or fellow believer has words of exhortation for you, those words will be tempered by the Holy Spirit in them and the spirit of receptivity in you.

In the end, the practice of encouraging others is much like other spiritual activities: we get better at it when we attend to it in thought and in action.

We must keep reminding ourselves to be encouragers. We can begin by asking the Holy Spirit to bring the need for encouragement to mind as we interact with others. Sometimes this will mean bringing kind words to a broken-spirited friend, but other times it can require that we deliver a tough challenge to someone who needs to be prodded. Ask the Lord to give you discernment in this regard.

But beyond our prayers, we do well to rehearse words of encouragement. One way to do this is to memorize passages of Scripture that encourage us and have potential for encouraging others if we were to deliver these words to them. A passage such as 1 Corinthians 15:58 can be especially meaningful when delivered at the right time: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

The legacy of Barnabas is both beautiful and powerful. And if, like Barnabas, we can employ encouragement as those “full of the Holy Spirit and faith,” we become real contributors to the fellowship of believers. 

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## QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Do you consider yourself equipped to encourage others? What further training or practice might you need to improve your skills as an encourager?
2. What value do you find in emulating biblical examples of excellence? How must you couple their examples with the unique way God has fashioned you?
3. Among the five types of encouragement—affirmation, appreciation, identification, instruction, and exhortation—which do you think comes most easily to you? Which do you consider a challenge?
4. How good are you at receiving encouragement? Do you brush it off or dismiss it when instead you should be learning from the words of encouragement that are spoken to you?
5. In Proverbs 27:6 we read, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” How important is friendship to encouragement, both as a giver and a receiver?