

Becoming the Servant of Encouragement: Affirmation

Acts 11:20-26

February 16, 2025

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Don't you like when you're complemented for your work? It's reassuring when others notice our efforts.

In Acts chapter eleven the believers been persecuted and left the city. They have traveled other locations including a city called Antioch. In this place there are both Jews and Greeks.

Acts 11:20–26 (ESV)

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.

To remain faithful and steadfast in our faith in Jesus we need affirmation. Barnabas arrives in Antioch following the direction of the apostles. He affirms the work of the men from Cyprus and Cyrene. They have spoken the good news of Jesus Christ. They have shared Jesus life, death, and resurrection. They have called people to confession and repentance.

These Jewish converts to Christianity from Cyrene and Cyprus were eager to speak the name of Jesus. They answered God's call to proclaim Jesus to non-Jewish people, to Hellenists, to Gentiles, to Greek speaking people, to anyone who would listen.

Barnabas the encourager arrives in Antioch seeing the genuine faith of these new believers. He affirms their faith in Jesus as their Savior and Lord. These people in Antioch were not Jews. They had not believed in the God of the Jews. They had not practiced the rituals of the Jews. They may not have every heard the promises of the Jewish Messiah, the Christ.

They were more than likely idol worshipers. They had most likely made sacrifices to idols. They had practiced the rituals of idol worshipers. If not idol worshipers, they worshiped their own desires. They chased after their own wants. They lived as they wanted. They were a people who had no hope in eternal life. They lived without peace in their hearts. Their greatest achievements were their own plans and reveling in personal pleasure. But, these people turned away from their sins and believed in Jesus. They gave their lives to Jesus. They were saved, redeemed, and delivered.

We gather on Sunday mornings to be affirmed, encouraged, and instructed in our faith. I want you to know that I am grateful for your willingness, your steadfastness, your faithfulness. You are the core of this fellowship. Your desire to be with one another, encouraging one another, helping each other

become more like Jesus encourages me as your shepherd. I want to be a good disciple maker helping each of you as followers of Jesus. It is my calling, it is my passion, I am responsible to Jesus. By His grace and power I strive to be like Him.

Each one of us has been equipped with a personality, spiritual gifts, and a growing faith. Let us continue to be faithful and steadfast as Christians. We are surrounded by people who don't care about Jesus. It maybe a result of having rejected Him for a variety of reasons. Or maybe it's a result of people having never heard that Jesus loves them and was willing to die for them. Either way we may feel attacked, we may feel shunned, we may experience their indifference. The reality is they need Jesus. They need to be saved. They need to be redeemed. They need to be delivered.

So, let us continue to be faithful and steadfast as Christians. Let us walk in the ways of Jesus. Let us give glory to Jesus with our words. Let us be a shining light to all those around us. Let us not give up on Jesus' power to save sinners.

Acts 11:23 When Barnabas came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

We aren't always ready to go out of our way to build up one another. Life too often gets in the way of us being encouragers, right? Just getting here today can be a challenge. Paying the bills may not be your biggest hardship, but dealing with work might be. Loving your neighbor might be easier than loving a family member. Getting out of bed might be trouble because your joints hurt.

Daily life can be a grind. Nobody gets a standing ovation for doing the dishes or cleaning the bathroom. Your grind might just be so stressful that you'd rather stick your head in the sand. But, first you'd have to get to the beach. Illnesses and diseases, old bones and old injuries keep you from being and doing what's important. So, staying faithful and having a steadfast purpose are hard to maintain. If you talk to Jesus, it's most likely about the crisis staring you in the face. At the end of one crisis you wait for the next one.

What you feel like you need is some encouragement, someone to affirm your value and your worth. You and I need to be built up in our faith. For us to remain faithful and steadfast we need one another. We need to see and hear the blessings of God in one another's lives. We need that time with other believers and our time alone with Jesus.

Faithful isn't going back to our old way of life. Faithful isn't falling for temptations over and over again. Faithful isn't giving up or quitting. Faithful is turning to Jesus when troubles come. Faithful is calling out to Jesus in the midst of the temptations. Faithful is loving Jesus more than we love the past. Faithful is willing to admit and turn away from sin when we see and hear it in our lives.

Steadfast isn't pursuing every possible avenue, but staying focused on Jesus. Steadfast isn't trying to do everything all at once, but keeping Jesus first. Steadfast isn't seeking a better way, but going the way of Jesus.

Steadfast and faithful means we know Jesus and we follow Him. It means we understand the mind and heart of Jesus, seeking that for ourselves. To be steadfast and faithful is to know what Jesus did and that you have that same power. Being steadfast and faithful is not standing still, but is always seeking to move forward even if it's baby steps.

Steadfast and faithful is the desire to be like Jesus at home, at work, when we're out on the town, and when we're at church. This is leaning on Jesus for everything, all the time. This is digging deeper into Jesus' soul, seeking His motivation, living out His passions. This is allowing ourselves to be transformed by His Holy Spirit. This is molding our actions to His actions. This is giving ourselves to others. This is being ready to take a risk.

This is what the men from Cyprus and Cyrene did. This was Barnabas. This is why the believers in Antioch were the first to be called Christians. This is you and me.

Acts 11:25-26 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.

Being an encourager means we're ready to do what it takes for the long haul. Being a Christian is a relay race, we're passing the baton of our faith to other people. Some people live like life is the 100 meter sprint. We know them, they are the people who walk fast, work fast, talk fast, and crash fast. For them life is short. That's not me, at least not at this stage in my life.

Others have grabbed onto the idea that their life is a marathon. They know they can't sprint. They've learned and adjusted to knowing that life is long. They have experienced many ups and downs and know that there will be more to come. They keep holding on because they know there is a finish line.

Many Christians are running the 100 meter sprint. Some of them are running it slowly. Many Christians are running the marathon. Chasing down the miles one at a time. Both the sprinter and the marathoner are individuals. They are individual races. It is the runner against the other racers. It's the runner looking for their next best time.

The relay is a team sport. It is handing the baton to another runner. Each runner has a predetermined distance to run. Each runner faces their own unique obstacles on the track. The handoff between runners is critical. Both runners must meet at the exact right place on the track. Both runners must match each runner's pace. Both runners must have a firm grasp on the baton. This requires training, working together, being faithful, being steadfast. Enough of this analogy, you get what I'm saying.

The men from Cyprus and Cyrene got it. Barnabas got it. They knew what they had in Jesus wasn't for themselves alone, but was for others. Barnabas went looking for Saul, who we call by his Greek name, Paul. Barnabas was aware of the relay race impact. Barnabas knew Paul's skills, personality, gifts, and calling. Barnabas was aware that Paul needed to affirm that calling by ministering with the believers in Antioch.

So they spent a year teaching, encouraging, affirming, and empowering the believers in Antioch. Soon the non-believers started saying they were followers of Christ Jesus, they were like Christ Jesus that they were proclaiming. They called them Christians.

Jesus spent three years encouraging, mentoring, and discipling twelve people. Jesus never used the term marathon, but He was passing on the baton of faith to these men. One of them dropped it and never picked it up.

What Jesus taught them started to sink in, to be absorbed, to be seen in their actions and heard in their words. He affirmed them in their faith, but He challenged them to deepen their faith, grow their

faith, put their faith into words, and put their faith into actions. When Jesus returned to heaven they took over doing the same thing, making disciples.

Acts 11:26 In Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Go, affirm one another helping others become like Jesus. Jesus died and rose again so we could be saved, and transformed into His likeness. Jesus shared how to live like Him. He is the greatest role model ever. Each day of His life with the disciples was an example of how to be faithful and steadfast. In every teaching moment He was speaking about how to live a steadfast life. In every miracle and healing He was demonstrating how to live by faith.

Jesus willingly died on the cross as our sin, being faithful and steadfast to God's plans and purposes. His faithfulness and steadfastness brought about betrayal by others, beatings, and lies spoken against. But not a day went by that Jesus wasn't faithful and steadfast. He calls us to be like Him. He calls every person to be saved by His blood; to be redeemed by His death; and to be delivered by His resurrection.

If your hearts desire isn't to be like Jesus then you need to question your commitment. I don't mean to insult you but, we have to be with Jesus. We are in a covenant relationship together and with Jesus. We are committed to one another and to Jesus.

There are people who call themselves Christians, but may not have in their heart to be like Jesus. They enjoy being saved from their sins. But, they aren't allowing themselves to be redeemed to a new life. They like being delivered to eternal life in heaven. But, they aren't ready to be like Jesus.

Christian means follower of Christ, imitator of Christ, little Christ. That's what the believers in Antioch were called by the non-believers. They saw in these believers the life of Jesus. They did what they said. They were faithful and steadfast.

This is where you and I come into the story. Again I'll say it, we are Christians, who can comfort, encourage, and challenge people. We are surrounded by people who either aren't being faithful and steadfast, or they don't care.

So, we can help them on this life-long journey of becoming like Jesus. We can affirm them in their faith, and challenge them in their lack of steadfastness.

We are followers of Christ, imitators of Christ, little Christ. We are disciple makers.