

THE GIFT OF EXHORTATION

Romans 12:8

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Today we break new ground in verse 8 of Romans 12. Beginning again with verse 6: “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully” (Romans 12:6–8, NIV).

This word “exhort” (found in the King James Version) is not a familiar word to common parlance or language. It’s used, perhaps, more exclusively in church kinds of circles. It is a beautiful word, coming from the combination of two Greek words—the same words which the Lord uses to define, or designate, the Holy Spirit, the “Paraclete.” Literally, an “exhorter” is “one who is called alongside to help.” An exhorter is one who is called to help somebody. The King James Version sometimes translates this concept of one called alongside to help as a “comforter.” In fact, the Holy Spirit is on occasion in the King James called the Comforter. That seventeenth-century designation of the English word “comforter,” then, was much closer to the Latin root than the word “comfort” is now in the English language. Now, comfort conveys the idea of more of a soothing presence. But in Latin, *comfortare* means to make strong. Therefore, a comforter was one who makes strong. And this fits well with the idea of an exhorter, or one called alongside to help. An exhorter is one whose life helps, encourages, and aids others who are in need. Especially, the exhorter is alert to needful situations within the body of Christ and within persons who are in the church family.

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This, then, becomes our third speaking gift that is given in the list of seven motivational gifts in Romans 12:6–8. We have looked so far at the gifts of prophecy—in fact, I think we spent three weeks there—and the gift of teaching. Now, the gift of exhorting.

There is a certain overlap among these three speaking gifts. We shouldn't precisely think that if you have the gift of exhortation you then cannot exercise the gift of teaching, nor can you exercise the gift of prophecy, or vice versa. In fact, in our series on prophecy I developed from 1 Corinthians 14:3 that one of the very purposes for the gift of prophecy was exhortation. Paul very clearly indicates that the prophet exists for the upbuilding, for the encouraging, and for the consoling of the Church. One of the purposes of teaching is the application to life, which is a great deal of what exhortation is about. Paul tells masters and slaves in 1 Timothy 6:2 that they are to teach and urge, or exhort, these duties. So teaching can go hand-in-hand with exhortation. Prophecy can go hand-in-hand with exhortation.

So while there is somewhat of an overlap among these speaking gifts given to us in Romans 12, there is also a distinctive among them. I personally feel that the distinctive between the three speaking gifts may be how it is that the person who is exercising the gift arrives at his message. The prophet depends upon the inner voice of the Spirit. The teacher, for his message, depends upon mastery of his subject through thorough study and preparation. But the exhorter depends upon a need to arise so that encouragement and inspiration can be given. The prophet directly hears from God. The teacher works with the materials that are available to him from life and from literature. And the exhorter is more in tune to where people are at in the moment existentially, if you will.

These three speaking gifts are designed within the body of Christ to compliment one another, rather than to compete with one another or to contradict one another. We all recognize when we see these gifts being given that there are some who especially excel in one area over another,

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while in any particular person all three of these instruments of ministry may be taking place.

That is, in one ministry you can see prophecy, teaching, and exhortation. But one might stand out especially above the other.

In Acts 15, where the Church is involved in whether or not to include people who have been Gentiles—and who are non-kosher in their eating habits and the like—we might say that the prophet would have emerged in that council and said, “Whom God declares clean, let not the Church declare unclean.” He might have come with a decisive word from the Lord. Whereas, the teacher might have come in that situation and would have said, “We must look at the Old Testament text and understand what the Pentateuch is saying. And it is laying the grounds for circumcision. But, however, we go to the exceptional cases where the Old Testament itself says we are to circumcise our hearts. And really what matters before God is not the multitude of sacrifices and offerings, but a pure and repentant heart.” So the teacher would have tried to work with all the material in the Old Testament and develop a theology of doing away with circumcision. The exhorter would have come along and said, “All of these Gentiles feel badly because some of you in the Church are looking down upon them and saying they are not spiritual. We need to encourage these brethren.” So the ministry of prophet, teacher, and exhorter—their message is derived from these differing sources of what they’re being tuned in to speak to.

Just as we have indicated with prophecy and teaching—all of us, in a sense, are called to prophesy or to teach in family or individual situations—so all of us may consider ourselves exhorters, as people who bring courage or strength to others. As you watch this word in the pages of the New Testament, you will find that the word “exhort” is especially used to apply to strengthening believers in times of persecution or unrest or suffering or struggle. There is to be a mutual encouragement among believers. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 4,

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is trying to exhort them, or encourage them, in regards to those believers who have fallen asleep in Christ. He gives them the good news of Christ's return. Then he closes that section by saying, "Therefore comfort [or exhort] one another with these words." In other words, it's an obligation of every believer to strengthen one another with this particular facet of doctrine.

Hebrews 3:13 tells us we are to exhort one another every day, that none of us be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. In other words, be alert to one another's falling away so we can exhort one another to remain pure in faith. In Hebrews, the writer also says in 10:25, "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but exhorting [or encouraging] one another all the more as you see the Day drawing near." When we gather together for worship, one of the things we must be doing together is encouraging one another. Especially as we see the Day drawing near.

That was a rather lengthy introduction to the subject of exhortation. I want to focus in on a specific illustration right now in regards to a person from Scripture who models the gift of exhortation beautifully, and perhaps we can set him aside as a classic example of an exhorter.

We would have to turn to Barnabas for our model. He is first introduced to us in the Scripture in Acts 4:36. His name is actually Joseph. He is a Levite whose home is in Cyprus. Some speculate that he may have been one of the seventy that the Lord sent out on a training mission, but not one of the twelve. He had been around the apostolic company, the Christians, long enough, and the beginnings of the Church, that people didn't call him "Joseph" any more. He deserved another name, which more fittingly described the personality trait which he was known for. So they called him Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." He was a cheerer-upper. He had this reputation. Some people get the reputation of sourpuss. Critical. If people were to quit calling me by my given name, George Wood, what would they call me?

Barnabas had a great reputation. There are some characteristics which emerged in his life which speak of an exhortative-type person—one on whom the gift of exhortation greatly rests.

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Remember that all of these gifts are given by God as a spiritual endowment added to our natural abilities to express and to relate. The first time he's introduced to us in Scripture in Acts 4:36, he's introduced as a giving person. One quality of an exhorter is that this person is a giver. In fact, he had a piece of land, which he sold. Luke uses him as a deliberate contrast, I think, to Ananias and Sapphira—who also have a particular piece of property to give, but they're trying to hold something back for themselves. Whereas, Barnabas is a person who holds back nothing. He gives wholeheartedly. He is in there giving—showing great trust in the people who administer the funds, and in the Church. It would be so easy for people to chisel on the welfare scheme that the Early Church concocted. But his giving nature makes him come across as an extremely generous-type being.

There's another kind of facet to this giving nature of Barnabas that, I think, is sort of a clue of what he may have been like physically, which would have helped gain him the reputation of being a giver. In Acts 14:11-12, when Barnabas is with Paul in Asia Minor in the town of Lystra, they are mistaken by the citizens for Zeus and Hermes. Barnabas was mistaken for Zeus. Statues of the Roman god Zeus preserved from ancient times always present Zeus as a big and husky and handsome man, the chief of the gods. Hermes was not quite so handsome, but was his messenger, his spokesperson. This identification of Barnabas by the townspeople at Lystra with Zeus could lead us to suggest that, as a person, Barnabas projected personal warmth, kind of a gregarious, husky guy who just put his arms around you and immediately made you feel accepted. In fact, I think it's a clue, at least, to an exhorter's personality that an exhorter is outgoing, concerned with others, and because he or she is that way, he's a person who is very, very easy to love. Touchable.

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It's not always the case that you can easily love a prophet. John the Baptist is a classic example. You can't feel like going up and throwing your arms around John the Baptist. Afraid he might tell you, "Repent!"

A teacher wrestles with instruction, and sometimes a teacher may not be all that approachable either. And administrators, those who have the gift of leadership or giving aide, sometimes they have to make decisions which affect people, and they develop a reserve about them. But an exhorter is somehow able to project love easier and becomes known as a giving person who is an extremely huggable person.

It's interesting to watch this trait begin to develop in children. If we believe that God supernaturally endows natural enablements that come along, it may be that those of you who have small children can even develop an idea of what may be happening in their life as to what directions they are headed. I was thinking of our boy, George. He's a person who finds it extremely easy to give. If he has gum, it's never a problem to ask him, "Can I have a piece?" He doesn't quarrel. He doesn't say, "I want it myself." If he has something on his plate and you want it, no problem. Just go get it. I think he's going to be an exhorter.

I. The gifts of giving are especially present in the life of an exhorter.

Another characteristic which blends extremely well with this that Barnabas experienced is that he's very trustful to other people. In fact, trusting toward a person whom nobody else trusted. Acts 9:26-27 relates the story of the converted Saul of Tarsus coming back to Jerusalem. It had been, according to the accounts of Galatians, an interval of perhaps three years between the time of his conversion and the time he comes back to Jerusalem. The church there has memories of him as going into home after home and dragging off believers into prison and even martyrdom. That phrase "dragging off," I don't get the idea that he knocked as a gentle cop. He was a member of the special weapons and tactics squad, or whatever. He came in and really did a

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number on the believers. And they were afraid of him, and thought this so-called testimony of conversion was a ruse to infiltrate the Christian community in order to wreak more havoc. So they wouldn't accept him. They kept him at arm's length. It was Barnabas, however, the Son of Encouragement, who, in regard to Saul of Tarsus, insisted on believing the best about him—and also did not hold Saul's past against him. He was willing to treat him as a new creature in Christ. Barnabas so expresses the attitude of that of an exhorter—to trust people, to believe the best about them and not to hold their past against them and dredge it up from time to time.

II. Not being a suspicious person.

All of these are, I think, qualities of exhortation. Barnabas was not asking himself, "What motive does Saul have up his sleeve?" On the other hand, I don't think Barnabas was naïve. But he had this ability to trust. In fact, Acts 11:24 calls Barnabas "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Underline "and of faith." This describes the trusting part of his nature towards others. As a person, he did not look for the worst in people. He looked for the best.

There are times when we really have people's fate in our hands. What we do in that moment is going to aide them in progress in the Lord or hold them further back. I, from time to time, teach homiletics classes, which is a preaching class where we have students preach and we evaluate their sermons. I'm always especially sensitive in a preaching class to help evaluate a student in such a way that it can be a supportive, rather than a negative, influence on them. All of us can make mistakes in anything that we do. Especially in preaching. We need to be aware of those mistakes; yet we need to be aware of strong qualities.

Where I really got this quality in my own life was my first year in seminary, when I was in a preaching class. There were about twenty to twenty-five of us guys in the class. I had come from a background of preaching which defined the three basic laws of preaching as: high, loud, and fast. That was my understanding of a good sermon. I decided, the Pentecostal that I was, that I

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would preach a sermon on Elijah because I had heard some great camp meetings on Elijah. And, furthermore, I had heard a few others in the class that I thought were rather dead and boring, and I thought I'd put a little life in the class. I got my sermon on Elijah and the widow of Zarephath and decked it up with all kinds of adjectives, and adverbs, and choice phrases, and memorable moments, and got up and delivered it with enthusiasm, verve, speed, and pitch. When I finished and the evaluations from the students were handed in, the reaction was overwhelmingly negative. My Presbyterian roommate, who I dearly love and who has had a great influence on my life said, "Who do you think you were? The pope? Who is this person up there that we don't know, putting on an image and a front that we don't know?" The guys were very, very down on me. Old Dr. Roddy saw what was happening. He got up when they were all finished plucking me apart like a chicken. He said, "We've got to say this for George. At least when he gets up, he's alive. You deadheads, when you get up, everybody goes to sleep. He's my Ozark hillbilly preacher." If he hadn't said that to me, I don't think I'd have ever wanted to preach again. Hopefully, the other students' negative criticism calmed me down somewhat. His encouragement was a critical moment in the development of the gift God had put in my life. He was extremely trusting, and he saw the best in people.

This is a quality of an exhorter. I think another thing that goes hand-in-hand, and you can see this with Barnabas, is that:

III. Barnabas had a positive, rather than a problem-oriented, approach to the Lord's work.

It comes out in Acts 11, where the Early Church gets word that some three hundred miles to the north in Antioch the church there is going gangbusters. It's not been started by the formal missionary efforts of the Jerusalem church. A group of traveling lay-Christians had brought the good news to Antioch. They had spoken to the Jews. They had spoken also to the Greeks. All of a sudden, a whole new kind of church had come into existence at Antioch that was not one-

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hundred-percent kosher like the church in Jerusalem was. What is the church at Jerusalem going to do with this? It's very important, if you're in an administrative function, whom you appoint on a committee. There were wrong people in the Jerusalem church to send up to Antioch in that situation. There were some who would have gone like the Judaizers, like the certain men from James who'd said, "We don't like this eating ham sandwiches and hot dogs and bacon. We think you guys ought to get saved. Then, when you start doing the right kinds of things, we'll accept you as brothers." But they chose out of their midst the one person who was known by his ability to be positive rather than problem-oriented. He comes to Antioch, and when he gets there, when he saw the grace of the Lord, Scripture says, "He was glad." There was this kind of fundamental life outlook to what he saw God doing. Of course, he must have seen problems. But his fundamental approach was not to see the problems and the immaturity of the faith that may have been there. But he was glad for what God had done.

I'm tempted to tell the story of the young nun who went into the monastery that had a vow of silence. You didn't speak when you were in the place. Every five years, you could come to the Mother Superior and say a sentence or two of what was on your heart, then go back into five more years of silence. After five years in that situation, she came to the Mother Superior and said, "My bed is lumpy." Another five years went by, and this time she said, "My food is cold." Five more years goes by. She comes back and says, "My bed is lumpy, my food is cold, and I'm going home." The Mother Superior responded, "That's good. All you've ever done since you've been here is complain anyway!" That's supposed to be an illustration that Barnabas saw the positive rather than the problem approach to life.

There's a prophetic instinct in me from time to time that wants to set everything right that I see that is wrong. One of the persons whom I deeply respect spiritually that used to be president of Evangel College, J. Robert Ashcroft, knew that I was in this prophetic pitch at a recent

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occurrence in my life. He sat down with me and said, “George, I have a word of the Lord for you.” He wrote it down and handed it to me. I carry it around because I need this. This is from an exhorter. He says, “Let God use you for the creative and constructive above the critical and corrective.” He says the critical and corrective are necessary on occasion. He didn’t say “instead of” but “above.”

Barnabas, in his own life, certainly modeled this. His creative and constructive approach to life was way ahead of his critical and corrective atmosphere. Because an exhorter is in a positive rather than a problem-centered approach of the Lord’s work, is very trusting of people, an exhorter can get in a jam when he’s caught between the conflicting interests of two different groups and he doesn’t know which way to turn. Barnabas got in this jam in Antioch when some of the more conservative brothers from James came, and he withdrew from table fellowship with the Gentiles because he knew he was going to have to hurt somebody’s feelings. Paul had to correct him for it. Paul, at that time, emphasized more the nature of a prophet.

Another quality in Barnabas was:

IV. He was secure enough within himself that he could recognize his own limitations and allow someone else rise in prominence over him.

He does this with Saul in Acts 11:25-26. He goes to Antioch, and Barnabas begins exhorting the church. Then he realizes the task is really too great for him. So he knows up in the province of Cilicia, Paul, the Jewish rabbi, had gone. He’s been doing, for a decade of his life, some ministry there. So Barnabas doesn’t leave it to a delegate or messenger. He himself makes that trip. The implication is that he had to really hunt Saul down. He found him and said, basically, “Saul, I need you. Come back to Antioch. It’s a situation just right for you, and it’s beyond my capabilities to fully handle.” Luke tells us that Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. When he found him, he brought him to Antioch. There Saul begins teaching, with Barnabas, the entire

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Christian community. The church continues to grow. When the first missionary journey begins in Acts 13, Barnabas—as the journey starts in verse 2—is at the head of the group. “Set aside for me Barnabas and Saul to the work which I have called them.” But by the time of Acts 13:13, we find it’s now called “Paul and his company.” They start off as Barnabas and Saul, and they got through one island. Now he’s already the number two position: “Paul and his company.”

Barnabas doesn’t even, at that moment, rate mention.

This being able to allow another person to rise to the level of their gifts, to recognize one’s own limitations, and to allow another to get ahead—and to push that person ahead according to the talents God has given—are real qualities of an exhorter.

It could not be said of Barnabas that he loved the place of honor at the feasts and the best seats of the synagogue. He was not the kind of a person to keep another individual down, keep them in their place. “You’re there, you’re frozen there, and you’ve got to stay there, because if you get out of that place then my position will be threatened.” He was not a threatened person at all. Secure enough within himself. An exhorter has to have this kind of security if he’s going to encourage another to develop their full potential in the Lord.

Another characteristic within Barnabas was:

V. He did not give up on people easily.

That’s a true quality of an exhorter or encourager. The situation here is John Mark, in Acts 15:36–39. They’re getting ready to take the second missionary journey. Paul’s ready to take off for Europe, and Barnabas wants to take John Mark, who had left them on the first missionary journey at a critical moment. There’s all kinds of theories as to why John Mark left: He got a fever; he didn’t like his cousin, or his uncle, Barnabas, being demoted to second place; he got homesick for mom. Some said, “No, Mark’s problem was he was a Judaizer, and Paul wasn’t going to have a guy along that was conservative theologically in that area of tradition, as John

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Mark was.” Whatever the reason, Paul said, “John Mark isn’t qualified to go on a trip like this. I don’t believe that guy could do anything! Trust him with a missionary trip? Forget it!” Barnabas says “You don’t see the talents in this young man. He’s going to be ok. He’s going to make it.” Barnabas believed in John Mark. When others had given up on John Mark, Barnabas did not. An exhorter is someone who just finds it extremely difficult, and will be the last one, to give up on a person.

We have to ask ourselves: Are there not people in our own lives whom we may have given up on? A quality of exhortation is to not give up. Love believes all things, bears all things, and hopes all things.

I’ve given basically five qualities of an exhorter. I want to relate these to everyday life. If you don’t have the ministry of exhortation functioning in a marriage and family, you’re in trouble. Look at your own family situation. Are you giving? Do you come across as giving? Or do you come across as a nagger? Which gift do you have?

Are you trustful or very mistrustful? Are you positive towards other members of your family, rather than problem-centered or problem-oriented? By that I might say that sometimes it’s possible to see what has been left undone in a personality or a life, but an exhorter tends to see what has been done, what is positive to build upon. Are you secure enough in the family to allow another person to advance in the family to the level of responsibility that God may be calling them to?

And not giving up on people. We need all these qualities within the church as well. There are some within this church family whom God has especially equipped above others with these kinds of ways of building us up. The exhorter is on the lookout for persons who are faint-hearted or discouraged, for persons who are lonely, for persons who are going through crises and trials, for those who are going through the suffering of the faith. New believers who have come to Christ

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and who are perhaps beginning to wrestle with the implications of that coming, and maybe even starting on the path that would lead them to falling away. The gift of exhortation is called into existence in this moment to bring this kind of encouragement.

Whatever we have said about the gift of exhortation of Barnabas, all of these apply to the Lord himself. He is, above all, the chief model. He is the Prophet. He is the Teacher. He is the Encourager. He said, "I will send you another Encourager." The implication being that He has already been the first Encourager. It is He who gives. It is He who is trustful towards us and believes that we are saints when we don't feel like we are. If we put our faith in Him, He declares us righteous. It is He who, toward us, is positive-oriented rather than problem-oriented. He is not waiting to see me in heaven to let the first question from His lips be: "Why did you let me down?" Or, "Explain your failure." But His attitude toward me and you is to say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter thou into the joys of the kingdom." He's positively-oriented. He's secure enough to allow another person to advance. In fact, you watch what happens under the liberating ministry of Jesus. He's so secure in His relationship with the Father that He'd take a group of common, ordinary people and raise them to positions where their full and latent expressions of talent and personality can all be developed. He doesn't give up. "Simon, Simon," he says on one occasion, "I have prayed of you that your faith fail not. I am not giving up on you" (see Luke 22:31-32). So we have a Lord who encourages us.

We have persons within the Body who are especially called to this ministry of encouraging in a unique way. All of us, according to Scripture, are to seek to encourage one another. God make us an encouraging people!

Closing Prayer

Our hearts are full, Lord, with, again, the great truths of how much You love us, how much You believe in us. It's true that when we live life, we can so often focus in on the limitations of

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people. And even in ministering to one another within the context of this church, it's always easy to be problem-oriented. We thank You, therefore, for putting among us this Word on exhortation and placing in our midst the gift of exhortation. We just simply ask that today's message would incite and excite all of us, to stir up the gift that is in us.

Lord, if this gift of exhortation is in someone's life and lying dormant, may today be the moment when You take their life and shake it and stirred up the gift of encouragement within them. All of us, Lord, in our relationships to one another have specialized gifts that have benefits to us because of the practicalities we can apply to everyday situations. Lord, we do ask that Your Word would go with us strongly. Work on us, that we might be people who are givers, trustful of others, positively-oriented. That we might be the kind of people who do not give up easily on others, but really believe and pursue. Lord, we ask these things in Your Name, and we're grateful for Your presence among us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.