

## How to Be an Encourager

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Rich Nathan

November 3 & 4, 2018

The E-Word

Acts 4:36; 11:22-26; 9:26-30; 15:36-41

In many churches, All Saints Day is a time, especially, to remember loved ones who have died in the past year. So we are going to have a time of remembrance at the end of the service today. I will be inviting you to honor the memory of loved ones who have died in this last year, and to honor the memory of any of your children, who have died, whenever that was, by coming up at your campus and lighting a candle as a token of your remembrance. And we'll take a time to pray together.

About 10 years ago, I was invited to speak at a convention for Mainline Protestants – pastors who were Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian and so on. I asked the group who invited me why they wanted me to come since my own church tradition is not Mainline Protestant, but evangelical. They said, “Your church is growing and many of our churches are not, so we thought you might talk with us about church growth.”

I responded by saying, “I don't really know that much about church growth, but what I would want to talk with you about is evangelism.” To which one of the inviters said, “You know, it's funny you mention the E-word. We were just talking in our presbytery about how uncomfortable we are talking about the E-word.”

Evangelism has become one of those unmentionable words. It's a term that's not appropriate for polite company. So, in some circles evangelism is called the E-word.

Jonathan Merritt is the son of a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. He's an award winning writer for *The Atlantic* magazine. He recently wrote a great book that's titled *Learning to Speak God from Scratch*.

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Book cover

We have copies of it in our Cooper Road bookstore. In the book, Jonathan wrote about moving to New York City and the conversation he had with a woman as they both waited for a subway train on a Sunday morning.

The woman asked Jonathan where he was headed. He explained that he was going to a “worship service”. She asked him, “What does that mean? I've never heard that phrase

before.” He said, “I’m going to a church.” She perked up and said that she practiced the Baha’i faith. She held up her crystal amulet necklace and explained that it protected her from evil spirits. And she kindly asked Jonathan if he was spiritually curious she would read his chakra and access the invisible energy fields around his body.

Jonathan felt himself becoming more and more uncomfortable with the conversation. He kept looking down the subway tracks waiting for the train to come. This woman was spiritually curious and she peppered him with questions about God and the Bible and the afterlife. Every time he would begin to explain, she would say, “I’ve never heard that word before, what does that mean?” Words that he took for granted like “grace” or “gospel” or “salvation”, she kept asking for definitions. He would stop and try to explain, but she didn’t know anything about the meaning of the word “sin” or the “cross” or the “blood of Jesus”.

So, Jonathan wrote this book describing why most people, including the vast majority of Christians, have become increasingly uncomfortable talking with people outside of the church about God, why we are particularly uncomfortable with the E-word – evangelism. 79% of American adults say that they have very infrequent or no conversations about religion or spirituality outside of church. Four out of five Americans virtually say that they never talk with anyone about God or spirituality outside of church.

The interesting thing is that older adults are less likely to talk about God or spirituality than Millennials. Younger generations are having more conversations than any other generations.

So, Jonathan Merritt, along with a major pollster, began digging in to the reasons why four out of five Americans say they virtually never talk with someone else about God or about spirituality. Here are some of the top reasons why people said that they have few or no conversations like this outside the church:

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- 28% said, “Religious conversations always seem to create tension or arguments”
- 17% said, “I’m put off by how religion has been politicized”
- 15% said, “I don’t feel like I know enough to talk about spiritual topics”
- 7% said, “I don’t want to be known as a religious person.”
- 6% said, “I don’t know how to talk about religious or spiritual topics without sounding weird”
- 5% said, “I’m afraid people will see me as a fanatic or extremist”

There’s a lot of personal discomfort around followers of Jesus sharing our faith. We may know that’s something we’re supposed to do. We love to read Bible stories and stories in history about people in history who have shared their faith effectively. We

may even feel guilty that we don't share our faith more often. The fact is, no amount of guilt or pressure is going to cause many of us to share our faith more often or even invite someone to church more frequently.

This month, I'm starting a new series that I've titled "The E-Word". Of course, I'm talking about evangelism. Rather than try to persuade you to get out there and share your faith, which I said for many people is becoming increasingly uncomfortable. I'd like to talk about four other activities, some of which start with an E (brilliantly, I might add) which are within reach for almost all of us. Leave talking about how we can jump over a bar that's seven feet high, let's start by asking whether we can step over a bar that's one foot off the ground.

In fact, I think these four activities (all beginning with E) are precursors – we might call them pre-evangelism – that create an environment in which a spiritual conversation can naturally emerge. Here's what we'll talk about over the next month in this series:

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**Encouraging** others

**Expressing** Jesus

**Eating** with others

**Engaging** the Holy Spirit

Today, in this first message on the E-word, I'd like to talk about how to be an encourager. Let's pray.

To learn how to be better encouragers, I'd like us today to consider the man who was the model of encouragement in the New Testament. His name is Barnabas.

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A model of encouragement

We first meet Barnabas in the book of Acts in Acts 4:36-37 where we read:

Slide Acts 4:36-37

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

There's some controversy regarding exactly how Joseph got his name, Barnabas. What makes the most sense to me is that Barnabas is a name derived from two ancient Aramaic words. Aramaic, of course, was the language that would have been spoken in Israel in the time of Jesus. It's the language Jesus would have spoken. It's a Semitic language related to Hebrew. And it would have been used throughout the ancient near

east as the common language of merchants became the common language of people. The name Barnabas may be derived from two Aramaic words.

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Bar = Son

Nabi = Prophet

In Jewish culture, to call someone a “Son of something” meant they were characterized by this thing. Jesus, for example, called his disciples, James and John, the “Sons of Thunder”. Perhaps he saw in them an impatient spirit that was easily stirred up. You know, they were blustering and quick-tempered.

Well, Barnabas was characterized by strong, prophetic gifting. One major effect of prophecy is encouragement.

Slide 1 Corinthians 14:3

<sup>3</sup> But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.

You know you’re hearing a true prophecy if one of the impacts in your life is encouragement. Who is Barnabas? From the letters of Apostle Paul, we discover that Barnabas was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. And he was a cousin of Mark, the gospel writer of the book of Mark. In the book of Acts, we discover that Barnabas is a big-hearted encourager and peacemaker. In fact, as we’re going to find in a moment, Barnabas made an incredible contribution to the growth of the early church because he was such an encourager. Despite not writing any book in the New Testament, and despite not being one of the original apostles, we find Barnabas at the intersection of a number of major decisions in the early church. It was because Barnabas, who was universally respected by all segments of the early church, gave the green light to different people and to different movements in the church, the church was propelled forward. Barnabas is this gifted encourager. He’s like the grease in the gears of the early church, making everything run smoothly. He’s the green light at the intersection, waving on the activity of the Holy Spirit.

Let me pause for a moment and ask a more basic question. If Barnabas’ life was characterized by encouragement, what exactly do we mean by encouragement? Why is encouragement so important?

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The power of encouragement

One psychologist said that

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“Encouragement involves affirmations to instill courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, and hope.”

Encouragement literally means to put courage in someone. You might say, if you wanted a short definition,

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Encouragement is a courage infusion

Encouragement is a hope infusion. Encouragement is a confidence infusion.

In ancient Greece, encouragement was the word used to describe speeches by leaders and soldiers who are urging one another on in battle. It's the word used to rally fearful, cowardly, hesitant soldiers and sailors to move courageously forward. An encourager is someone who puts courage into the faint-hearted, and strengthens feeble arms to keep fighting. Encouragement pushes people to higher level than they ever thought possible. Encouragement causes people to take a high road rather than the low road, to be better than they are – more committed than they are, more persevering than they otherwise would be. Encouragement takes someone who is ready to throw in the towel and give it all up and causes that person to keep going. To persevere. Give it another shot.

How does encouragement do that? We read this:

Slide Proverbs 18:21

<sup>21</sup>The tongue has the power of life and death,  
and those who love it will eat its fruit.

Words are powerful. One writer said this:

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Encouraging words are difficult to remember. Discouraging words are difficult to forget.

Has someone ever said something to you that was wounding, that was hurtful, that you can remember even decades later? Someone said something to you when you were a child or a teenager or a young adult about your looks, or about your intelligence, or about your potential, about your work. And even though it was said years ago, you still can feel the comment's sting.

Every person you will ever meet is dying for encouragement.

Mark Twain once said,

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I can live for two months on a good compliment.

The Smithsonian in Washington includes a display of several items that President Abraham Lincoln had with him on the night that he was assassinated. One of the articles is a worn out newspaper clipping which celebrated Lincoln's accomplishments as a president. It reads:

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Abe Lincoln is one of the greatest statesmen of all time.

It's amazing, even the President of the United States needs regular positive reinforcement in his life because negativity can permeate our souls.

Encouragement provides a courage infusion. A confidence infusion. If you want to understand the power of words, consider the difference between two simple words. The difference between the two-letter word "no" and the three-letter word "yes". Our lives are changed based upon whether someone says no to you or yes to you. Will you marry me? Did I get the job? Did I get into my dream school?

One of the major themes in the Bible is the difference between the word "no" and the word "yes". Justification, in the Apostle Paul's writings, essentially is the "Yes" of God over your life. Justification puts us in the right with God. God says yes! Condemnation is essentially God's "no" over your life. God says, "Depart from me". And there's no decision that you'll ever make that's more important than whether you say "yes" to Jesus as Lord of your life or "no" to Jesus as Lord of your life.

No shuts things down. No is discouraging. No closes doors. It's easy to say "No". No is safe. No eliminates risk. No is a red light to new possibilities.

Yes is risk-taking. Yes opens the door. Yes is encouraging. Yes is the encouraging word that Jesus speaks to us over and over again.

Jonathan Merritt, in his book *Learning to Speak God from Scratch*, makes the wonderfully insightful point that there is a direct connection between Jesus and saying "yes". In the book, he points out that Paul started the church in Corinth. He spent time there with the community and when he left he promised he would be back soon. But there was a series of events that prevented him from coming back. Paul's failure to return to Corinth raised some questions in the minds of the Corinthian believers. If Paul couldn't be trusted to keep his word on his travel plans, why should we trust his gospel? If they couldn't believe his promises, why should they believe his proclamation?

In responding, Paul makes one of the most curious statements in the New Testament. He says,

Slide 2 Corinthians 1:19-20

<sup>19</sup> For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not “Yes” and “No,” but in him it has always been “Yes.” <sup>20</sup> For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.

No matter how many promises God has made, they are “yes” in Christ. In other words, God has made a lot of promises over the years. He made a lot of promises to the Jews. He makes a lot of promises to us. Unlike us human beings, God is always faithful to his promises. He never makes a promise and fails to deliver. Jonathan Merritt calls Jesus God’s walking, talking “Yes in the flesh”.

We Christians need to say “No” to bad choices and sinful behavior, but so many people find themselves saying “No” not to bad choices. So many people find themselves saying no because they are afraid, because the situation is new, because they’ve never tried this thing before, because they want to play it safe, because they feel like their security is threatened. No is often a fear-based word. Yes is a faith-based word. No says the situation is hopeless. Yes says, “With God’s help there’s always hope.”

Yes is a word of encouragement. Let me tick off for you four examples of encouragement from the life of Barnabas as we meet him in the book of Acts.

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Four examples of encouragement

One simple way to encourage someone is to say “Yes” to being generous.

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Say “Yes” to generosity

Here’s what we read in Acts 4:

Slide Acts 4:36-37

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

We are talking about the E-word over this month. Before we get to evangelism, we begin with being an encourager. One simple way of encouraging someone else is by being generous to them. There’s often anxiety around the check coming when you’re

with a friend or a co-worker. How are we going to divide this up? Well, let me relieve the anxiety. Why don't you just pick up the tab? Not always, but often. Generosity is not a matter of having a lot of money. Don't kid yourself into thinking that if I made \$20,000 more a year, I would be more generous. Generosity is not a matter of money, it's a matter of motivation.

Be generous in giving a tip. Notice those who are serving and reward them with a tip that's worth working for. Certainly, be a generous tipper of waiters and waitresses and people who clean your room in a hotel or people who carry your bags in the airport, taxi and Uber drivers, hair stylists. Notice who is serving. You say, "Evangelism is hard for me." Start by being generous. Give thoughtful gifts! Remember people's special occasions in life – birthdays, anniversaries, funerals.

I'll tell you something, friends. The more you are open-handed with sharing your money, the easier it's going to be for you to be open-mouthed with sharing the gospel.

Barnabas was a man who said "Yes" to generosity. You want to be an encourager?

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Say "Yes" to sponsoring people

Let's read:

Slide Acts 9:26-30

<sup>26</sup> When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup> He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. <sup>30</sup> When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

When Saul, who was later known as Paul, returned to Jerusalem he was in a very difficult position. His old associates had heard about his defection from Pharisaical Judaism. They hated him because he was considered to be a traitor. Even though, Paul always considered himself to be a lifelong Jew. But unlike many other Jews, Paul met the one that he believed fulfilled all of the promises that God had made to the Jewish people. He came to believe that Jesus was, in fact, the Jewish Messiah. So Paul's old associates among the Pharisees rejected him.

On the other hand, the Jewish disciples of Jesus with whom Paul now wanted to associate had not forgotten Paul's campaign of persecution. They didn't know. Is this

guy a spy who is lying about his conversion so he could find out more about the disciples' situation and lock them all up? What assurances did they have that Paul was the real deal? Assurances came from Barnabas, the son of encouragement. He acted as Saul's sponsor. He essentially said, "You don't need to know Saul. You just need to trust me. I have vetted Saul. I know about the integrity of his life and the reality of his conversion in Damascus." Saul needed someone to open the door for him to the disciples in Jerusalem. It was Barnabas who ran ahead of him and opened the door and welcomed him in.

Friend, you want to be an encourager? Then say "Yes" to sponsoring people. One of the greatest ways to encourage is to open the door by introducing especially young people to key contacts in your organization, folks who can help them with their careers. Don't horde all your relational equity. Over the years, many of us have gained credibility. Our opinions are respected. We can hold the door open for someone else. Tell those who matter, "You trust me? I know this person. This is someone you want to get to know."

How do we encourage?

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- Say "Yes" to generosity
- Say "Yes" to sponsoring people

And the third thing we see from the life of Barnabas...

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Say "Yes" to new situations

Slide Acts 11:22–24

<sup>22</sup> News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

<sup>23</sup> When he 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. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

The gospel was spreading in the Mediterranean world. Jews were talking to other Jews about Jesus being the Jewish Messiah, the fulfiller of all the promises of God. But then some really daring people – risk taking people – went to the city of Antioch. They said if the gospel is good for Jews, might it also be good for Gentiles? So they engaged in a little experiment. They went and talked to non-Jews – the Gentiles in the city of Antioch – about Jesus as Lord and Savior. And Gentiles in the city of Antioch were wide-open to the gospel. This was a message they were waiting for. This was exactly the message

that met their deepest needs. Many of these Gentiles became followers of Jesus as Lord. This was a totally new situation.

Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem said, “My goodness, we really don’t know what to do. We’ve got a bunch of Gentiles who are professing Jesus. We need to check this new thing out. Are these Gentiles following the same Jesus that we follow? Are they trusting the same Jesus that we trust? The way they worship, the way they do things is very different than what we do in Jerusalem. We need someone to investigate this. By the grace of God, the man they chose to vet this new situation was Barnabas.

So let’s read again:

Slide Acts 11:22-24

<sup>22</sup> News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

<sup>23</sup> When he 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. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

So many people, especially in the church, are afraid of changes in culture. Their first response to anything new is “No”! That’s not the way it’s always been done. When I first came into the church as an 18-year old there was a big war being fought about whether we were going to sing out of a hymnal or use transparencies on an overhead projector. Clearly, God could not be honored if we did not have a book in our hands. What’s this new music? People in the church responded in fear some said. No to guitars. No to drums. We need to play the same music that Jesus would have listened to – a pipe organ!

But then there are faith-filled encouragers, people like Barnabas, who have eyes to see what God is up to even though it looks different than what they’re used to. Yes, these people are wearing different clothes. Yes, they behave in different ways. But these faith-filled encouragers are able to look through all of that and say, “You know what? It’s not the way I would do it, but I think this is Jesus. I’m going to bless what I’m seeing over here.” Change is always threatening. Depending on your temperament and the area that you’re being asked to stretch and change in, it’s easy to lock the door and say “No”. No to this change!

You want to be an encourager? Be someone who injects courage and hope in someone who is going through a big change in life.

Maybe you meet someone who just lost their spouse. You know, along with grief, part of what your friend may be feeling is fear. My husband has died. My wife has died. I now need to face life alone. Or maybe someone is about to have their first child. I’ve

never been a parent before. I don't know if I'll be a good father or a good mother. Or someone's getting married. Am I making the right decision? I just moved to town. I hope I'll be able to make friends. I'm brand new in the office. I hope I'll be accepted. I hope I'll be successful.

One way to be an encourager is to come alongside of someone who is going through a big change in their life. Speak words of hope. You can do this! It's going to be ok. You will make it through. You will succeed. Encouragers

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- Say "Yes" to generosity
- Say "Yes" to sponsoring people
- Say "Yes" to new situations

And, finally, as we read from the life of Barnabas, encouragers are people who

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Say "Yes" to people who have failed

Slide Acts 15:36-39

<sup>36</sup>Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."

<sup>37</sup>Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, <sup>38</sup>but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. <sup>39</sup>They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,

We don't know why John Mark left Pamphylia and didn't continue the mission. Maybe missionary life became too difficult for him at the time. Maybe there were some relational conflicts or discomfort. Maybe John Mark became sick in Pamphylia or maybe he was homesick. Maybe he didn't like the fact that Paul was leading and not Barnabas. It could have been a combination of all of these things. Whatever the reason, Paul considered it a desertion. This is a guy who can't really be trusted anymore and if we bring him along it's going to hinder our mission. On the other hand, Barnabas sees John Mark very differently. I suspect he saw a change in John Mark. John Mark wanted another chance and Barnabas was presented with Paul's rejection of this man. The result was:

Slide Acts 15:39

<sup>39</sup>They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,

This is not a friendly, easygoing difference of opinion. There's a lot of emotion in the dispute between Barnabas and Paul. Hard words were exchanged. But I see in Barnabas the mark of being an encourager. Barnabas said "Yes" to someone who had failed. Barnabas put courage back into John Mark. Essentially communicated by his faith in Mark, you can be useful again in the Lord. You don't have to be on the back burner forever. You don't have to sit on the bench. You can be back in the lineup.

God is in the business of restoring failures. Think of the story of the Prodigal Son. The father welcomes back his erring son with open arms. Think of the story of Moses. Moses murdered an Egyptian. God called him back into leadership. Rahab was a prostitute. She became an ancient ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ. Zacchaeus was a tax collector who was greedy and abused his position. Jesus called him to be a follower. Peter denied the Lord three times, and yet Jesus called him back into service.

What does it look like for you to encourage someone who has previously failed? To put courage back into someone. That they can be better than that. That they can aim higher than that. You believe that this person can succeed.

If you're in a hiring position in your company or business maybe you would hire somebody who has a record, but has things turned around and have gotten on the right path. Maybe as a coach, somebody has messed up in a game. You don't yank them, you put your arm around them and say I'm keeping you in the game. Maybe as an encourager, you're the one in your family who reaches out to an estranged family member who hurt you or hurt someone else. You say, "I still want to have relationship with you."

Encouragement is the responsibility of every one of us. It's not like some of us need to be encouraged and others are the encouragers. The book of Hebrews says, "encourage one another". We all need to be encouragers and we all need to be encouraged.

Here's what I'd like you to do. In the bulletin that you received on your way in is a card. What I'm going to ask each of you to do is to write a note of encouragement to someone. Don't throw the note away or leave a stack of them by the door as you leave. What I'm going to ask you to do, each of you, is to just think of someone who you want to encourage. Write them a brief note. It doesn't have to be flowery. It doesn't have to be great poetry if you're not a poet. But especially if someone is outside of the church, write a note, mail it to that person or give it to that person.

As your pastor, I want to tell you that you don't need to start with explicit evangelism. Start more simply. Start by learning to be an encourager. Let's pray.

## How to Be an Encourager

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Rich Nathan

November 3 & 4, 2018

The E-Word

Acts 4:36; 11:22-26; 9:26-30; 15:36-41

#TheEWordVC

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