

# Playing Second Fiddle Well

*By Sinclair Ferguson*

I sat in recently on an interview of a prospective associate minister for our congregation. He was a widely experienced and well-proven minister. As the discussion proceeded, one of our senior and deeply experienced elders asked the question, “How well do you think you will be able to play second fiddle?”

Several thoughts passed through my mind. The first was this little ditty:

*It takes more grace than I can tell  
To play the second fiddle well.*

The second was that this man manifestly had the grace to do it. The third was a variation of the second: “I think this man has the Barnabas spirit.”

Barnabas—the name means “Son of Encouragement.” But that wasn’t the name on his birth certificate. There he was known as Joseph the Levite, originally from Cyprus. He was a man of means, for he sold a field and gave the proceeds to the apostles in order to bring blessing to his fellow believers. Not only did he yield up the right to his field, he yielded up his right to a say in how the proceeds from its sale would be used (the first is often present without the second!). That was the kind of man he was—driven by a desire to help, to provide for and edify his fellow saints, whatever the need. He had what the hymn describes as a “heart at leisure from itself.” And this was the man who, when the Jerusalem church gave Saul the cold shoulder, became an encouragement to him, took him under his wing, and nurtured him until he had found his feet and his life’s work in the apostolic church (Acts 9:27).

In a life in which (among other things) Satan hindered him, Jews opposed him, Alexander the coppersmith harmed him, and Demas deserted him, Paul must have thanked God often for Joseph the encourager. Indeed, even in days when the relationship between them was strained because of John Mark, it was typical of Barnabas that he was committed (rightly or wrongly) to doing everything he could to encourage Mark and redeem his career (Acts 15:36–41). Moreover, he seems to have succeeded (2 Tim. 4:11).

It is impossible to read about this man without thinking: Every church needs at least one Barnabas. Where can we find them? But there is a yet more basic need. It is to ask: How can I become a Barnabas? For being an encourager is an essential part of authentic Christian ministry, whatever our particular gift may be (Rom 12:8; 1 Thess. 4:18, 5:11; Heb. 3:13, 10:25). But what are the prerequisites?

1. The first is just this: being willing to play the second fiddle well. To encourage means

being willing to “consider others better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3, NIV). That does not mean believing that everyone else does things better than you do. That would be unrealistic. Rather, it means caring for others in a way that shows you put their needs before your own. An inability to encourage is often rooted in an absorption with self that is blind to the gifts of others, and a pride that cannot bring itself to praise God’s grace in them. This Barnabas quality was also present in Paul’s later “second fiddle,” Timothy: “I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare,” Paul wrote. Sadly, he added, “everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 2:20–21, NIV).

2. The second prerequisite is an ability to assess our fellow Christians by an accurate canon of judgment. Most of us have all-too-painful contact with people who see their chief ministry as tearing fellow believers down to size. By contrast, at the end of an hour with Barnabas, most of us would leave feeling taller and more able to press on in serving the Lord.

What helps us here is recognizing that spiritual growth is not measured by how tall another is but by the difference between where a person was and where that person is now. Someone whose understanding is less than perfect, whose character still has edges to it, may have travelled further and overcome many more obstacles than his or her fellows. In that light, we begin to see reasons to encourage fellow Christians that we otherwise might never have noticed.

Presumably Barnabas saw something in Saul that others failed to see. For all we know, he was still not the easiest of men to love. But even without the vision that Ananias received (Acts 9:10), Barnabas saw that Saul’s swift growth was evidence of the powerful working of grace.

3. The third prerequisite is a fully biblical view of Jesus. He could pull people up short: Pharisees, hypocrites, and temple moneychangers all felt the lash of His holy tongue. But Jesus was the supreme Son of Encouragement. A bruised reed He would not break, a smoldering wick He would not snuff out (Isa. 42:3). An as encourager, He refused to be discouraged (literally *bruised*, Isa. 42:3). Like so many other things about being a Christian, the secret is having a clear understanding of who Jesus is, what He is like, and what ministry He exercised—and becoming more like Him.

Perhaps it was from long friendship with and observation of Barnabas that Paul learned the principle that “from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer” (2 Cor. 5:16, NIV). He certainly saw it consistently illustrated to him. His letters make plain that he was a good pupil. We need to learn in the same school.

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*Dr. Sinclair Ferguson will be speaking this month at Ligonier’s 2000 National Conference, “Upsetting the World,” in Orlando, Fla.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> (2000). *Tabletalk Magazine, June 2000: The Power of Great Words*, 27–28.

