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December 10, 2023

Nothing Requires Greater Wisdom Than This

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“Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord” (Acts 11:22,23).

As I write these lines, Paul Earnhart, one of the Lord’s greatest servants, has just passed from this life at the age of ninety-two. If I’ve ever known a Barnabas-like encourager of other people, it was brother Earnhart. Only the Lord knows the names of all the thousands of strugglers, this writer included, who were uplifted by his compassionate godliness. But knowing how to do what Barnabas, Paul Earnhart, and other “encouragers” have done is not easy or automatic. It requires as much wisdom as any activity we encounter in doing the Lord’s work.

If we lack the “gift” of encouragement, that doesn’t mean we have no responsibility in this work at all; we must use the ability we do have. The question is not how our encouragement skills compare to someone else’s; it’s whether our skills are any better than they used to be. Like any other part of the Lord’s work, we need to acknowledge the difficulty of being a wise encourager — and then take steps to do it more effectively than we’ve done it in the past.

If we define encouragement as “helping someone to have the courage to do what they need to do,” it becomes obvious that there’s no one-size-fits-all approach. If someone is struggling with a step they need to take, the words that would bolster their courage may differ from those that would encourage someone else. Effective encouragers know that people are different, and so are their problems. Nevertheless, there is one nearly universal guideline: we all want to have encouragement delivered to us gently and kindly.

Granted, there are times when we need to be rebuked, and that takes a special wisdom all its own. And yes, even when encouragement is what we need, there are times when it should take the form of a strong exhortation. But for our meditation today, let’s be thankful for the folks like Barnabas and Paul Earnhart (and probably your grandmother too) who knew how to encourage us with a beautiful blend of skill and kindness. Let’s learn how to emulate them, wisely tailoring our help to the needs of the present moment.

“Do not remove a fly from your friend’s forehead with a hatchet” (Chinese Proverb).