

His Patient Persistency

You've heard the phrase, "With friends like these, who needs enemies?"

Perhaps you have had a friend like that. One of the things I like the most about the Andy Griffith show is the relationship between Andy and Barney. Barney loved Andy but more often than not he caused Andy no small amount of grief. And yet, despite all the the misunderstandings and trouble Barney caused Andy, Andy's friendship, love and support for Barney never wavers.

One of my favorite episodes is when a rich, arrogant business man fails to show up to stand trial for speeding through Mayberry. Andy goes to Mt. Pilot and arrests him, takes him back to Mayberry and makes him stand trial. In retaliation the business man sends a lady reporter to Mayberry masquerading as a college student. She has lunch with Barney and gets Barney to start bragging on himself and in the process starts complaining about Andy's failure to follow the rules and being too soft on people. She eventually writes a scandalous article in Mt. Pilot paper accusing Andy of being a lawless sheriff and Andy is put on trial himself. Barney is shocked to find out that the star witness for the prosecution is none other than Barney! In this clip is Barney's testimony in the trial, first the incriminating testimony against Andy, and then his stirring testimony for Andy. **[show clip]**

Sometimes our biggest problems are caused by friends who are trying to help. I wonder if the same is not true with God? How often does opposition to

what God wants to do come not from those who oppose God but those who are actually trying to follow God, or at least they think they are? God promises a child to Abraham, but after several years past Sarah decides God needs some help and tells Abraham to have a child with her handmaiden Hagar. He does and Hagar gives birth to Ishmael and the Middle East crisis. The rabbi Saul persecutes the followers of a false Messiah, thinking all the while he is serving God only to discover it is Saul who is false and it is his own Messiah he has been persecuting.

It is a humbling thing to discover your help is not helpful; your impulses impede more than assist; your suggestions subvert more than support. Was there anyone who struggled with this more than the disciple Peter? Peter loved the Lord. There is no doubt about that. And because of that love he had some wonderful moments. When Jesus asked, *Who do men say that I am?* The disciples answered with some uncertainty. *Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.* Jesus asks them, *What about you? Who do you say I am?* It was Peter who said, *You are the Christ, the son of the Living God.*” Jesus’ response must have thrilled Peter. *Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in Heaven.*” Don’t you know that made Peter feel good. But the feeling did not last long. Three verses later Peter gets a very different response from Jesus. Jesus tells his disciples he must go to Jerusalem and be killed. Scripture tells us, *Peter took [Jesus] aside*

and began to rebuke him. Think about that. Peter rebuked the very person he just confessed as Lord and Messiah!

Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you! Jesus turned and said to Peter, *Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men.* Wow that's quite a drop, from "Blessed are you, your words come from the Father" to "Get behind me Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God!" Jesus goes on to explain why Peter's and for that matter our own attempts to help God often go awry. *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.*

Peter's problem and ours is that our motivations to help God are rarely if ever selfless. Too often the reason we do what we do, is to somehow promote or prove ourselves, or gain approval for ourselves from others, even when we are trying to do good. Jesus tells us if we would follow him, self-interest isn't our best guide. When self interest is our guiding principle, we make the wrong decisions, we say the wrong things. When self interest guides us, even when we think we're helping God, we will find ourselves opposing him. Peter struggled with this. There are many examples in scripture of Peter's mis-statements and mistakes, never more so than that fateful, final weekend before the cross. In the span of only a few hours its amazing how many times Peter got it wrong.

First, as the disciples gathered in the upper room for their last supper together, Jesus does a strange thing. He takes off his outer robe, wraps a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin and washes his disciples' feet. The act was embarrassing to the disciples, to see their Master so humble himself. Perhaps Peter only said what everyone else was thinking, but Peter said it. *No, you shall never wash my feet.* Once again he is saying "No" to his Lord. Jesus corrects him. *Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.* Typically impulsive Peter answers, *Well then Lord not just my feet, give me a bath!* Did Jesus roll his eyes when he answered and said, *No Peter, you've already had a bath, just your feet?*

Later during the meal Jesus tells the disciples they will all fall away as the scripture says, *I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.* Peter again is the one who responds. *Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.* Surely this was not a statement that endeared him to his fellow disciples. "Even if these guys fail you, don't worry, Lord, I won't fail you. You can count on me." It's important to Peter to be worthy of his Lord, to prove himself. Again Jesus' words must have stung. *I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.*

Even as those haunting words still hung in the air, Jesus leads them to the garden to pray. Soldiers arrest Jesus. Peter is convinced what must be done. He grabs his sword and lashes out in defense of his Master. It was a brave and heroic

act, surely what any faithful disciple should do. Wong again, Peter. *Put your sword back, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?* Is there exasperation in Jesus' words here? As if to say, "Peter, stop! Do you think I don't know what I'm doing? Can you still not trust me? How long will you insist on imposing your way on me? When will you understand God's ways are not your ways? This is hard enough for me to do, Peter. I know you are trying to help, but believe me, what you are doing is not helpful."

Peter was only doing what came natural to him. And of course that's the problem. We all wrestle with it, don't we. What comes natural to us is so often not right. The proverb is true, *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death* (Proverbs 14:12). We are fallen creatures. It seems that what is natural to us is almost always opposed to God. What Peter had to learn, and us too, is that the nature which is in us has to die. We must quit trusting in ourselves; we must lose ourselves and begin trusting in the only one who is worthy of our trust, Jesus.

Peter learned that lesson the hard way that weekend. He denied his Lord three times with curses as Jesus predicted. After the third denial, Luke says, *the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter... Peter went outside and wept bitterly.* Something died in Peter that night. The person he thought he was, the person he thought he needed to be, the person he desperately wanted to be, died.

Even after the resurrection Peter still seems distraught about his failure. He tells the disciples, *I'm going fishing*. Perhaps I read too much in this statement, but I wonder if Peter is not thinking, *I'm going back to my life before I met Jesus. I know he is the resurrected Lord. I know he is going to establish his kingdom but he will do it without me. I'm no longer worthy. I had my chance to stand up for him and I failed. Whatever Jesus has planned for the future, there is no way it can include me, not now, not after what I did.*

Then Jesus shows up again on the shore. He calls them in from the lake to eat some breakfast. As they eat together around the fire, Jesus turns and looks straight at Peter and asks him, *Simon, son of John, do you love me?* Peter answers, *Yes Lord, you know that I love you. Then, feed my sheep.* Jesus asks him the same question again. Peter answers the same. Then Jesus asks him a third time and the scripture says this third question hurt Peter. Three denials, three confessions. Three times he said, *I do not know the man*. Now, three times he's given grace to say, *I love you*. It is as if Jesus is saying to Peter, *I know you feel unworthy. I know you feel you have failed me. I know you feel you have nothing now to do with my mission. I know you Peter. And I want you. Not because you are brave or worthy. Not because you are better than anyone else. I want you because I love you. And I only need to know one thing from you. "Do you love me?"*

Peter does love the Lord and he does not go back to fishing. He becomes the great apostle. But Jesus isn't finished with him yet. Years later Peter is visiting friends in Joppa. One day while he is praying he has a vision of a great sheet let down from heaven filled with all kinds of animals which Jews were forbidden to eat. A voice from heaven says, *Get up Peter, kill and eat.* Now Peter is not who he once was. The former Peter who took the Lord aside and rebuked him might have said, *Never Lord, these are unclean.* The new Peter is a little more humble. *Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.* Again Jesus' response corrects the so often incorrect disciple. *Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.* It's been eight years since Jesus commanded his disciples to go and preach to all the world, to all the nations. The apostles have yet to get beyond Judea. The church which was to include all the nations, is still exclusively Jewish. Peter and the other apostles are only doing what comes natural to them, and it does not come natural to them to reach out to Gentiles.

Since Peter won't go to Gentiles, Jesus brings a Gentile to Peter, Cornelius who has received a vision from the Lord guiding him to Peter. When Peter is invited to Cornelius' house, it's a difficult decision. Jews aren't supposed to do this. Peter once again is faced with the tension between doing what seems natural, or doing what his Lord tells him to do. *Do I follow my tradition or the Lord's word? Do I trust in what's familiar or do I trust in the Lord?* What will Peter do?

This is definitely not the old Peter. No more saying “No” to the Lord. No more rebuking the Messiah. No more inserting his own ideas and judgments. Against his religious training, against his tradition, against his old nature (but not his new one) he travels to Caesarea and for the first time the gospel of Jesus is preached to Gentiles. And before Peter can offer the invitation, the Spirit comes down upon the Gentiles just as it did in Jerusalem eight years before. Peter’s astonished. This is not exactly what Peter expected. So what else is new? It wasn’t the first time the Lord did something differently than Peter would have done. Peter says, *Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.* In other words, “Well if God’s going to accept these guys, I guess we better too.” Well done Peter!

This is the new Peter. Christ is getting into Peter. But unfortunately not everyone has come to the same conclusions about the Gentiles as Peter has. When the church folk back in Jerusalem hear about this they’re not happy one bit. *You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them?!* So Peter had to explain himself. He tells them of his vision and Cornelius’ vision. He tells them about the Holy Spirit falling upon the Gentiles as it had on them. Finally he says what Jesus had been waiting so persistently to hear Peter say since he first invited him to leave his fishing nets and follow him. No more “Not me Lord!” No more “Never! Lord.” No more rebuking his Messiah. Instead he tells his upset brethren,

Then I remembered what the Lord said. John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. So, if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?

Here is the formula for us all. *I remembered what the Lord said... Who am I to oppose God?* It was no longer about Peter's ideas, Peter's plans, Peter's wisdom. Now it was *What has the Lord said* even if it leads Peter away from his ideas, his plans even his wisdom. The persistency of Christ finally pays off. It took some time and no small amount of patience, but Peter is becoming the rock Christ knew he could be. What a lesson for us all. We are all just like Peter. We are so ready to solve problems, to get busy doing what needs to be done, to plan God's work for him. We are usually not nearly so ready to stop and pray and discern what the Lord wants to do. Our focus is on what we can do, our faith in the resources we can see rather than trusting in a God more than able to provide whatever is needed to do what he wants to do. Like Peter we are so often more interested in what we can do for God, than what God is trying to do in us.

The Lord does not need our advice; he certainly does not need our rebukes. We need to learn the lesson Peter had to learn and ask ourselves, "Are we opposing God?" Are we in tune with his will or are we trying to insert our own? Is our attempt to help God really helpful? Are we guilty of placing our faith in ourselves, our wisdom, our plans rather than trusting in our God. Are we motivated by self

interests or have we learned that our best interest is to die to ourselves and our own glory and in that death discover the true glory and purpose of our lives, to serve the Lord. Years after this incident, Peter would write a letter which included words that express pretty well what Peter had come to understand. *All men are like grass; and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fail, but the Word of the Lord stands forever.* (1 Pet 1:24,25). May our glory fade and may our lives be conformed more and more by the Word of the Lord so that He is glorified in all that we say and do. And in the mean time we can give thanks to God for Christ's persistency as he patiently waits for us to grow up.