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**Title: The Barnabas Factor: When an Enemy Needs a Friend**

**Text: Acts 9:26-31**

How many of you have ever taken a risk in your life? Would you agree, life consists of a series of risks – one risk after the other? We're presented with a circumstance, the outcome of which is uncertain. We assess the situation and, based on a series of internal calculations, either (1) take a risk by faith or (2) take a pass. You see it in a toddler deciding to take her first steps. You see it in a teenager deciding to ask for his first date. You see it in a parent deciding when to hand over the keys to the car. You see it in a business owner making a critical hire. You see it in a person who failed the first time, trying to decide whether or not to try again.

The decisions we make are often based on several factors: 1. Am I naturally a risk taker? Usually you have an inclination toward playing it safe or taking risks. God, in His infinite wisdom or perverse sense of humor, often provides us with a spouse or close friends who are at the opposite end of the spectrum. 2. What do my past experiences tell me? If I've been down this road before, success or failure will color my current choices. 3. What are other people saying about it? We can all think of times when we were influenced beyond our comfort zone by the voices of those we trust. 4. Is the potential benefit worth the possible pain or loss? We usually do a quick risk/reward calculation to determine whether or not this might be a step too far. Seldom are the stakes higher in this risk/reward equation than when it involves RELATIONSHIPS: Entering into NEW relationships, breaking off DESTRUCTIVE relationships, choosing to forgive and possibly restore BROKEN relationships.

Let's slip off our shoes and put our feet in the sandals of the disciples. Who has their worst enemy been? Saul. Why? The disciples were Christ followers and he was a Christ hater. He did everything he could to destroy Christianity. He was given to putting them in prison and even murdering them when he thought necessary. He made life difficult for them, their family, and any Christ follower. Now word has come to them that Saul has changed. He is one of them, a follower of Christ! How do you respond? Yeah, right! It's risky to love people! People will hurt you. Sometimes they can't be trusted. We've all been burned by someone in the past. The idea of taking a risk on other people might not be very appealing, but sometimes that's exactly what God has in mind for us. And, sometimes on the surface, it makes very little sense.

That's exactly the circumstance a Christ follower named Barnabas found himself in. He had to make a decision to take a risk on a relationship that no one around him was willing to take. He overcame a number of common obstacles to taking risks by faith, and he invested in a risky relationship that ultimately shaped the course of Christianity. As we study the story of Barnabas, God may prompt you with a name of someone whom He is at work in. God may even nudge you toward a step of faith that could change the course of a life, a family, or even a community of faith.

In our text we see Saul, a newly converted disciple who was formerly an enemy of the church, came to town hoping to meet up with the disciples. They really weren't interested. Who could blame them? They knew who this guy was, what he had done to their family and friends. Maybe they even WANTED to believe that he had changed, but it sounded too good to be true. They didn't want to take a chance that this rumored conversion was just that – a rumor. I'm guessing that if I'd been in their place, I may have done the same thing. Why is that? What keeps us from taking a risk on people?

- 1. FEAR keeps us from taking a risk.** We might fear failure when we're starting a new project or business venture. Maybe we're afraid of rejection, especially in relationships. We wonder: Will they accept me as I am? Can I tell them this part of my past? Can I really open up to them? When it comes to taking a risk on someone who has hurt us in the past, we're probably most afraid of being hurt again. Maybe you've been hurt by an ex, a business partner, an employer, or a child. And they come to you and say, "I've changed!" We want to believe that they have changed – but we're afraid. Saul had hurt people. He had thrown men and women into prison. He had probably broken up families. He wasn't just opposed to Christianity, he was dedicated to destroying it. If you were a Christian living back then and you heard that Saul was coming to town, you would hide or get out. When he showed up in Jerusalem, talk began to circulate that Saul had changed. Most would assume that this was a rumor to be disregarded. Remember, the disciples weren't just protecting themselves; they were protecting the entire community of believers. Taking a risk on one man just didn't seem worth it. Sometimes fear can sound a lot like wisdom: "Do you really think that's a good idea?" "Did you really hear from God about that?" "I'm not afraid of failing; I'm just being careful." **But God doesn't rationalize our fear; He conquers it!** That's why God

told Joshua to “*be strong and courageous*” (Joshua 1:9). Essentially, He was saying to Joshua, “Get moving! Don’t be afraid, just go and I’ll go with you!” Fear wants to keep us right where we are when God has a better destination for us.

2. **DOUBT keeps us from taking a risk.** If you had been in the disciples’ place, would you have believed God could change Saul? You know the saying: “If something sounds too good to be true...it probably is too good to be true.” Saul – the number-one enemy of Christians – becoming one of them sounded WAY too good to be true. It’s understandable to be wary when someone comes to us, claiming to have changed. What if they’re lying? We’ll get hurt again. Maybe you’ve been hurt by someone over and over. Now, you’re at the point where you don’t feel like you can trust that person again. We know that we’re supposed to believe God can change anybody. It’s just that there seem to be so many people who never do change. And if we’re talking about a person who can harm me and perhaps even brought harm to me in the past, the safer thing is to stick with my doubt, right? Why take a risk on a lost cause?
3. **CYNICISM keeps us from taking a risk.** Cynicism happens when we decide that our preconceived prejudices represent reality; we apply them to everyone and everything. Cynicism thinks it knows better: People don’t change. They can’t be trusted. Risks are never worth it. We weren’t born yesterday; we’ve figured out the way things *really* work. We aren’t about to be taken in like everyone else. We know what people are really like: We know their game, their motives, and we won’t be fooled again. When we’re cynics, we like to say, “I’m just being realistic.” But do you know what cynicism is? Cynicism is taking all of our fear and doubts and making them hard. We forge them into armor that we can wear to protect us from the world. That’s what real cynicism is. I doubt that all of the disciples in these verses were cynics, but I bet a few of them were. You can’t see your friends get arrested and killed without becoming a little hardened. A few of the disciples probably didn’t care if it was true or not: “Who cares about Saul? Let him figure out his own life. This is what he gets for all he’s done.” Cynicism hardens our heart to true relationship and makes future potential friends pay for the sins of past relationships. When we have the chance to take a risk on someone, Fear says, “They might hurt you.” Doubt says, “They probably haven’t changed.” Cynicism says, “They will hurt you and they will never change.” These are the things keeping us from taking a risk. What about you? Which of these is a struggle in your life? You’re not alone. The disciples were feeling all of these things, which is why they steered clear of Saul. His conversion could have been an act meant to trick them, or it could have been a temporary change. But there was another possibility: HE COULD HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMED BY GOD! Only one person was willing to consider that possibility – Barnabas. We don’t know why Barnabas decided to go looking for Saul. Perhaps they knew each other. Maybe Barnabas had heard something the others hadn’t, something that piqued his interest, OR maybe Barnabas decided that Saul was worth the risk. We know from Acts 4:36 that Barnabas’ name means “son of encouragement,” and we see him acting as mediator at other times as well. Perhaps this was just Barnabas being Barnabas, looking out for people others had written off. Whatever the reason, Barnabas decided to look for Saul and find the truth for himself. And what he found CHANGED EVERYTHING!
4. **APPLICATION. How can we be a Barnabas for others? A. Take the time to hear their story.** Someone said that the reason God gave us two ears and one mouth is because He intended us to listen twice as much as we talk. “Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you’d have preferred to talk.” – Doug Larson. “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” – Stephen R. Covey. Barnabas listened. Here are five words that could transform a relationship: “That’s interesting. Tell me more.” Simple words, but incredibly inviting. Try it sometime. The recipient will often relax and open up, and true understanding begins to take place. The rest of the disciples assumed they knew everything they needed to know about Saul. Either they assumed they already knew his story, or they were too afraid to find out differently. ILLUSTRATION: Have you ever been driving your car and someone cuts you off, no blinkers, no warning? “What a jerk!” you think. There’s no excuse for that sort of behavior, right? But what always happens? Later that same day, as you’re driving down the road, you change lanes and realize that you just cut somebody off! And you can see them in the rearview mirror, they’re mad and honking. But you aren’t mad at yourself! You think, “I didn’t see them!” or “I was distracted!” See, we know the circumstances of our mistake, so we’re a lot more forgiving. When we don’t know someone else’s story, it keeps distance between us and them. It makes it easier to judge them, or write them off, or to be afraid of them. When we listen to someone else’s story, our opinion of them often changes because we understand them. We realize where they’re coming from, the circumstances that might have affected their choices and behavior. Maybe Barnabas wanted to hear Saul’s story. Maybe he wanted to understand what had led to such a dramatic change in Saul’s

life. And boy did Saul have a story to tell! **B. Verify the facts.** If all we do is take someone at their word, there can be devastating consequences. It's important to remember that Barnabas didn't insist the church welcome Saul until he had met with him to check out his story. Barnabas wanted to make sure Saul was for real because if it was all a lie, the entire church would be in danger. Let me be clear: Being willing to take risks on people does not mean that we open ourselves up to abuse. We need to discern for ourselves whether God is truly at work in their lives or whether they're simply trying to manipulate us. There is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. We ought ALWAYS to forgive. That's a given. Reconciliation is not always a good option. If reconciliation is to occur, the facts must be verified: Has TRUE repentance occurred? Is there a willingness to make RESTITUTION? Is there EVIDENCE of a CHANGED life? I don't know what all Barnabas and Saul talked about. Maybe Barnabas asked Saul to tell his story several times to see if there were inconsistencies. Maybe Barnabas had already talked to other people who knew the story and wanted to see if Saul's version lined up with theirs. Or perhaps GOD had revealed the truth to Barnabas, and he just wanted to make sure Saul was STILL a committed follower. Whatever Barnabas did to verify the facts, he left convinced. He made sure that all of his doubts were addressed before he brought Saul to the rest of the disciples. Notice, though, that once his doubts were taken care of, Barnabas acted decisively. He didn't sit around for a month wondering what he should do. Once he became convinced of the truth of Saul's story, he knew that it was time for Saul to meet the apostles. **C. Trust in God's power.** The third thing is actually the first thing we need to do: Reject cynicism and trust in God's power. If we decide to take a risk on someone and yet begin the process with a cynical attitude, we aren't taking a risk at all. We're simply waiting for the person to fail us, because we're assuming they will. I couldn't find one example of Jesus being cynical in the Gospels. Why do you think that is? Cynics pride themselves on being realistic, on understanding the way the world really works. No one understood people or the world better than Jesus. So why wasn't He a cold, jaded cynic? Because He KNEW the POWER OF GOD! Jesus understood better than anyone else that God could transform people. When some of the Sadducees tried to trap Him with a trick question, Jesus told them what their problem was: *"You do not know the Scriptures or the power of God"* (Matthew 22:29). Cynicism cannot be our starting point. We must trust in the power of God because if HE can't change people, no one can! In each of his appearances in the book of Acts, Barnabas exudes confidence and trust in God's power. He is willing to intercede for people whom others have given up on. He knew what God could do, and so he went to Saul without any hesitation.

- 5. Conclusion.** At some point in our lives, I assume we've all had a Barnabas in our corner (I know I have) – someone who believed in us when others didn't. They were willing to take a risk on us, and it changed our lives. We needed a Barnabas, and now someone else needs us to be their Barnabas. We need to move past our FEAR and be willing to HEAR THEIR STORY. We need to overcome our DOUBTS by VERIFYING THE FACTS. We need to reject CYNICISM and TRUST IN GOD'S POWER. Barnabas took a risk and changed the world. God is asking us to do the same. Are you looking for opportunities to take risks in faith? Who needs YOU to be their Barnabas?