

Dealing With Life's Button Pushers *Difficult People*

A pastor once said to me, tongue in cheek, "I love the ministry, it's the people that drive me crazy." Of course the truth is, ministry is people.

Maybe you feel like this: "I love my job, it's the people I work with I can't stand." Or "Marriage is a great thing, unless your married to my husband." How about, "I always wanted children, until I had my kids."

Why is it that we have so many problems with relationships?

Browse the books at amazon.com. Type in "difficult people" in the search.

Here's just some titles that come up:

Dealing With People You Can't Stand

Dealing With Difficult People

Dealing With Relatives (...even if you can't stand them)

Coping with Difficult People

Since Strangling Isn't an Option

201 Ways to Deal With Difficult People (Quick-Tip Survival Guide)

How to Work with Just About Anyone

Jerks at Work The How to Easily Handle Difficult People Handbook

Toxic Coworkers

Winning With Difficult People

Nasty People

Thank You for Being Such a Pain : Spiritual Guidance for Dealing with Difficult People

And that's just the short list. It's real obvious that there's a lot of us who have someone in our life we can't seem to get along with.

Where do we even start in this whole deal? Obviously there's no end to self help books that supposedly give us direction, but my question with self help books is always one of authority.

It's like, "Wait a minute, who said so?" Who says if I do this, this, and this that I'll solve my problem?" That person becomes an authority just because they wrote a book?

“Who says that some author can give me directions about human behavior?”

That’s why my first question is always, “What does the Bible say?” The Bible is a book that makes a staggering claim about itself. It says, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.” Eight hundred fifteen times it says, “Thus says the LORD.”

Now obviously any book can make that claim, but for me, if a book is going to make that claim, there’d better be some objective proof.

The objective proof for me is splashed all over the pages of the Bible. For instance, the Bible was written over a period of 1400 years by 40 different authors but it has a central theme of God’s redemption.

The Bible is filled with thousands of historical references. Some are only found there. For the past 150 years archaeologists have studied Biblical lands. For the past 150 years archaeologists have been finding exactly what the Bible said was there.

The Bible is filled with hundreds of references to scientific fact. Even though it was written in what we would consider a time of appalling scientific ignorance, it doesn’t contradict one known fact of science. From evaporation and the water cycle, to different types of blood for animals and humans, to the earth being round, where the Bible touches on science, it’s accurate.

And then there’s prophecy. The Bible has a prewritten history of the world, of Israel, of Jesus. This isn’t just vague generalities, we’re talking specific names, dates, and places. Some of these prophecies were made 700 years before the fulfillment. The writers didn’t just come up with them on their own.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. The Bible is God-breathed. It’s got God’s fingerprints all over it.

Now, if that’s true, and I’d challenge you to check those things out for yourself, but if that’s true, then when the Bible speaks about human behavior we can know it speaks with complete authority.

The Bible says God created us in His own image. God is the authority on human behavior because he doesn’t just deal with the mechanics of behavior. God doesn’t sit around in a white lab coat observing how people react. He deals with the motives of behavior, and that’s the heart.

So what I want to do this morning is try to find out from God's wisdom what to do about difficult people.

I. God Created Us With A Need For Human Companionship

Turn to Gen 2 pg 4

In chapter one at each successive point in creation we read, "And God saw that it was good."

Read 2:18

Who said it wasn't good that man should be alone? God. God fashions the woman from Adam's side and Adam says, "This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh."

"All the animals were great, but this is someone like me. This is someone I can have a relationship with."

God hardwired each of us with a need for relationships with others. It's the heart of marriage. It's the heart of friendships.

God fully intends for us to interact with and relate to others.

I. God Created Us With A Need For Human Companionship

II. Sin Brings Problems Into Human Relationships

Read Gen 2:16-17 That was clear enough

Read Gen 3:6 God's command was clear and their disobedience was blatant

Read vs 8-9 Adam and Eve had walked and talked with God. Now suddenly their hiding. Sin marred their relationship with God.

Now look how it effects their relationship with one another: **Read vs 12**

Here's two people who were literally "made for each other." They had it all. They lived in a perfect environment. And as soon as Adam sins he goes from, "This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh" to "The woman whom You gave to be with me, it's all her fault!"

Sin marred their relationship with one another.

The same with their sons, Cain and Abel. Cain becomes jealous of his brother and finally murders him.

There aren't fairy tales. They're not stories the ancient Jews made up to explain the beginnings of the human family. Remember, *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.*

These are the facts and they show us what sin does to our interpersonal relationships.

Now think about this. We've had the last 6000 years of human sin compounded. Our 21st century American culture has said, "We'll tolerate God if we don't have to obey His commands.

Keep Him confined to church on Sunday morning, but keep Him out of our lives.

No wonder we have problems getting along. No wonder there are a hundred books out on dealing with difficult people. Difficult people are all around us because sinners are all around us.

And I'll let you in on a little secret. Sometimes, the difficult person is you. And sometimes the difficult person is me.

My take on the Bible is this: If God says something in the Bible, it's important.

There are over 100,000 new books published each year. We have 24 hour cable news, satellite radio, podcasters, bloggers.

There's plenty of people with something to say. But out of all that cacophony of noise only God speaks with absolute authority and trustworthiness.

So if God says something once my ears ought to perk up. I need to listen and listen well. But now, what if God says something over and over again?

To my way of thinking that takes things to a whole new level. If God's taking up valuable space in the Bible to say something more than once it's obviously something we desperately need to hear.

In the NT I don't believe there's any subject that gets more airtime than how we get along with each other. That tells me it's our second biggest problem.

Just like Adam and Eve we have two basic problems and one grows out of the other. Our problem with each other grows out of our problem with God.

Why are we so hard to get along with? Why do we have such a tough time getting along with others? *Sin Brings Problems Into Human Relationships*

The sin that stands between us and our Creator is our first biggest problem.

God made Adam and Eve a promise back in the Garden. He said this: A seed of woman would come. Satan would bruise His heel; but He would crush the serpent's head.

A man would come. Satan would wound Him, but He would destroy Satan.

Over time God got more specific. He explained who that man would be, when he would come, and how he would void out Satan's agenda.

That man is Jesus Christ. He was the sinless one who took our sins upon Himself. At the cross it looked to like Satan had won. God's plan was defeated.

But three days later the tomb was empty, sin had been paid for, and Satan's plan had failed.

The Creator Himself took care of the sin that stands between us and Him. The Creator calls us to have faith in the cross of Christ and the Christ of the cross.

The Creator said through the lips of Jesus, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."*

- I. *God Created Us With A Need For Human Companionship*
- II. *Sin Brings Problems Into Human Relationships*
- III. *The Bible Gives Us The Answer*

How do you deal with that difficult person in your life? How do you deal with that person who always annoys you; who you can't stand and strangling isn't an option?

The God who restored our relationship with Him gives us the way.

Turn to I Corinthians 13 pg 1021

I Corinthians 13 is probably the best known chapter in the New Testament. It's read at weddings because it deals with the subject of love. In fact it's often referred to as "the Love Chapter."

Love in the Bible is described by action. We tend to think of love strictly in terms of feeling. God's definition is radically different.

It's an action, but it's a specific type of action.

Read vs 1-3

There are actions we could do that might look pretty impressive to the people watching us. We could speak eloquently about our love for people. We could be really religious. We could serve the poor and needy, but still not do it with the kind of love that God has modeled.

We could do these things out of pride, out of a desire to have other people pat us on the back and say how wonderful we are. We could do good to others to try to buy our way into heaven. We could even do it because it makes us feel good inside.

We could do good for a lot of reasons that have nothing to do with biblical love.

And you know what? When our motive is self serving, life's all about us. And when life's all about us we have a real hard time with people who interfere with us getting what we want or what think we need.

That's the problem with difficult people. They interfere with us getting what we want or what think we need.

What is real love then?

This has got to be our pattern. The Bible says God's very nature is love. It says, *"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love."* (I John 4:7-8)
The essence of God is love. Twenty five of the 27 New Testament books deal with love.

God is the ultimate example of someone who knows how to deal with difficult people. And here's how to do it. It's not about fads and pop psychology. It's about understanding and displaying God's kind of love.

Let's look at some of the characteristics of love in I Corinthians 13:4-8. This isn't going to be so much a definition of love as a description.

Someone has said instead of reading these verses love is this and love is that, you can substitute "Jesus" for "love." That will help personalize things.

Remember Jesus was fully human. He was submissive to the Holy Spirit and obedient to the Father.

In that sense He is our example. We can live this stuff out with God's strength if we really want to. If God's priorities superseded ours we can do this.

We won't do it to perfection like Jesus. We'll still be in the learning mode. But we will have a whole different outlook on the people who push our buttons when we live this out.

Read vs 4 "Love suffers long and is kind"

The New Testament was originally written in Greek and the Greek word translated "suffers long" is *makrothumeo*.

Makros means "large" or "long" ie. macrocosm as opposed to microcosm

Thumos means "anger" or "wrath."

So, "love is long suffering" means love is patient. Love doesn't jump on people and fly off the handle.

This word is used 9 times in the New Testament and almost every time it's about being patient with people.

We're not going to get a description of love in a sterile environment where everything's fine and nobody ever rubs us the wrong way.

Life's not like that. People aren't like that.

I don't know about you, but I don't have any problem being patient with people who give me what I want. I have no problem with people who aren't in my face, who aren't making gestures at me in traffic, who aren't annoying me.

I have no problem at all.

But life's not like that.

Here's what the inner heart of love looks like when it's put right smack in the middle of difficult people. Love is patient.

Jesus Christ is patient with us and the Bible says that we're to have the same mindset as He does. It says, *"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus..."*

We tend to say, "Love is patient but I'm only human. I'm fallible. So that's my excuse. That's my divine hall pass when I lash back at my wife, or I ream out someone at work, or I scream at my kids.

You know what the Bible's doing here? Verses 4-8 paint a portrait of love. And God expects us to take a picture of ourselves and lay it over that portrait of love to see how we match up.

Why do we lash out at people who agitate us? Because we're so vain we think life is about us. We're wrapped up in ourselves and so we say to ourselves, "He can't talk to me like that." They're not going to do that to me and get away with it."

It's all about me. We can deal with problem people but we're going to need patience.

The second thing verse 4 says is **"love is kind."**

Now at this point you may be thinking, "What's with all this kindness and patience? You'll never get anywhere in life like that. You've got to be tough or people will walk all over you. The difficult people will just be more difficult if you're weak."

Our world system can't understand it but love is power and kindness is the result of that power.

The German philosopher Nietzsche hated Christianity for encouraging kindness. He said kindness makes people waste their resources on the weak.

He said if we could rid the world of Christianity and love we could produce a super race. The strong would get stronger and the weak would die out."

Charles Darwin just put a fancy name on a classic impulse, survival of the fittest.

Nietzsche dressed it up a little philosophically. And Adolph Hitler applied it to politics.

We can look back now and see how absolutely wrong they all were.

Anybody can get mad at someone else. Anyone can return evil for evil. That doesn't take any special strength.

But Jesus said, *"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."* (Matthew 5:44)

It takes strength to be kind.

What's your attitude today towards people who aggravate you, people who make your life difficult?

What a tremendous sense of peace having the mind of Christ gives. No ulcers, no nerve problems, no bitterness, no sleepless nights. Just kindness and the calm assurance that you know you've done right before God and others.

How about this one? **Love does not envy.**

If the guy in the next cubicle at work gets that raise you thought was going to be yours and you're grumbling and complaining instead of being happy for him that's envy. If your neighbor pulls up in that shiny new SUV and you're still driving a 79 AMC Pacer and you begrudge what he has instead of rejoice at his good fortune, that envy.

Billy Graham said this of Envy: "Envy can shrink our circle of friends, ruin our business, and dwarf our souls... I've seen hundreds cursed by it."

Maybe you've seen this: a father or mother dies and there is money or an estate left, and the brothers and sisters go at each other over the money.

Envy takes down years of family relationships and caring. That family may never speak to one another again. Love does not envy!

On the day that God spoke to His people and gave them the 10 commandments he said, *"You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God."* Exodus 20:3&5

What was that all about? Was God afraid that Israel might want to worship other gods

and He wouldn't get what He wanted from them? That He would miss out on something?

God told Israel not to worship other gods for the same reason He tells us not to worship at the altar of materialism, success, education, or whatever false god's we might be attracted to.

It's not because He would be incomplete if we did. It's because we would miss out. It's because Israel would miss out.

God cares about people. Difficult, stubborn, annoying, selfish people like you and me. God cares about our ultimate good.

How about you? Do you see that difficult person as someone made in the image of God who needs grace?

Verse 4 says, *"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up."*

Love doesn't count itself as better than others. Pride looks at all the difficult people and says, "Too bad they're not like me."

The truth is, usually the difficult people are the ones who are doing just the opposite of the things we're reading about. A person who brags about themselves and is always trying to make themselves look good is hard to work with and even harder to live with.

But remember, boasting is just a way of trying to look good when we suspect we're not. We brag when we are afraid that when people notice us, they won't admire what they see.

That annoying person who's always talking about themselves is very insecure. Boasting and pride ultimately have their root in the same place as all these other things on this list. That's self!

Biblical love, having the mind of Christ, centering on others leads us to build people up, not puff ourselves up.

Verse 5 continues this description of love. ***Love does not behave rudely.***

When I'm one of those difficult people and I'm rude, why does that push other people's buttons?

Because by my rudeness I'm saying, I don't care about you or anyone else around me. I'm only thinking of me.

Love doesn't act rudely.

Actually everything so far can be summed up by the next description, ***Love does not seek its own.***

Love is always unselfish. Selfishness is at the root of every evil. Think about what problems are in your marriage, in your job, in your family, with your neighbors, because you can't get your eyes off yourself.

How hard is it for you to get along with other people? Does it seem like everybody else is a difficult person to you? Love doesn't seek its own agenda. If we're not seeking our own, then we won't be difficult to get along with.

If we're not seeking our own we're going to see the difficult people around us in a whole new light.

The next thing that verse 5 tells us about love is that it isn't provoked. KJV and NIV have "isn't easily provoked" but the word "easily" isn't in the original. It just says love is not provoked.

Love isn't cranky. Love can handle other people who don't live up to our expectations. Now there's a sense in which we should be provoked by sin. Sin destroys people. Sin keeps people from being all that God wants them to be. Sin is offensive. So, if we're going to be provoked, we ought to be provoked to anger at sin.

One of the old Puritan writers said, "I am determined so to be angry as not to sin; therefore to be angry with nothing but sin."

The problem comes when we get angry at the sinner. And, difficult people are usually difficult because of their sin.

A person who is cranky, who has no love, can't handle the fact that other people make mistakes. They keep a checklist of the wrongs done to them.

That leads to the last phrase in verse 5, *thinks no evil.*

The word translated “thinks” is the verb *logizomai*. *Logizomai* was a book keeping term. It means, “to write in the ledger book,” “to put on someone’s account.”

That’s why NIV translates this, “keeps no record of wrongs,” and NASB has, “does not take into account a wrong suffered,”

Love doesn’t keep a list of other people’s faults.

It’s amazing how many people do this. Two guys were talking and one says, “I’m having a real problem discussing anything with my wife. Every time we get into a disagreement she gets historical.”

God doesn’t do that with us. His forgiveness wipes the slate clean. He’s cast our sins as far as the East is from the West and buried them in the deepest sea.

If we start thinking like Jesus we’ll do to others what He’s already done for us.

Those are an amazing couple of verses aren’t they. I was originally going cover 6 and 7 too, but once I got into it I figured this was enough to tackle at one sitting.

I don’t know about you but I have plenty to work on already.

Difficult people. We all have them in our lives. What can we do in light of I Corinthians 13? Here’s some practical steps:

1. Depend on God's love first. Before you can deal with another person you have to start with the certainty that you are loved, accepted and secure with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Have confidence in God's love first. Don't seek the approval of others. That'll make you a perpetual coward. Rest in God's acceptance of you.

2. Set appropriate boundaries.

Own up to the ways that you've contributed to your strained relationships. Take responsibility for your own sins and stop blaming the other person. Be honest about what you've allowed that person to do in your life.

Don’t allow the other person to keep you from doing what's right. Don't allow their

outburst or temper tantrums or silence or aggressive behavior or taunts that you're a "holier-than-thou" type or whatever, move you from righteousness. Remember that you can't change other people. You can only change you.

3. Get connected to godly community

I can't stress this one enough. You need people to walk with you through the change process. Invite them to be totally honest with you. You tell them the changes you want to make in you and ask for their accountability.

4. Accept reality, forgive, and be honest with your expectations

The really neat in all this is that when you change, your example and the power of the Holy Spirit will often begin to change the other person. But that doesn't always happen.

Here again we follow God's pattern. He never forces us to do things against our will. We need to accept reality, forgive the difficult person, but don't ever give up.

5. Give change a chance

Real change takes time. Give it a chance. When it things get difficult remember that God is shaping your character in the process. Don't leave a relationship before you've implemented all the changes you need to make.

6. Practice patience

Seek God and his strength.