

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dealing with Difficult People

Sunday, November 25, 2018

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

1st Peter 3:8–18

Today I want to talk about something all of us can relate to: dealing with difficult people. By difficult, I mean all categories—the gossips, the bullies, the manipulators, the intimidators, the blamers, the criticizers, the complainers, the whiners, etc. Just fill in the blank. Anybody know anyone that fits into one of those categories? Today, we are going to explore some wisdom that works when dealing with difficult people.

By a show of hands, how many of you know a difficult person? How many of have worked or work with a difficult person? How many of you live with a difficult person (never mind, don't raise your hand on that one)! If none of you raised your hands for any of those questions you probably are not getting out enough! You may want to beef up your social calendar!

The truth is all of us have to deal with difficult people. Some of you work with difficult people. Some of you have neighbors that are difficult people. Some of you will have Thanksgiving dinner this week with difficult people! Some of you have family members that are difficult. Some of you live with difficult people.

I must confess to you that being a minister is not all robes, Bibles, leather chairs and the Hallelujah chorus. When you are a spiritual leader for a large community of faith, you are going to have deal with some difficult people. And I have had to deal with some real doozies! The problem is there was no class in seminary on how to deal with difficult people. I wish there had been! Along the way I have made mistakes when dealing with difficult people and through those mistakes I have gained some life-changing wisdom about dealing with difficult people.

I have a hunch that many of you would like to hear this wisdom I have learned. For some of you are dreading Thanksgiving dinner because you will have to suffer through that overbearing family member who belittles everyone. Some of you work with someone in the office who gossips about everyone and she is driving you crazy! Some of you may have an in-law who criticizes everything you do. No matter what you do it is never good enough! Some of you have a neighbor or friend that you see from time to time who talks behind your back and seems to sabotage you. Some of you live with folks who are always blaming you or someone else

for their problems and they never take responsibility for themselves.

What do you do with people like that? How do you respond to people like that? Maybe you are tired of feeling awkward or angry or nervous around that person, but you don't know what to do about it? Is there a way to respond to difficult people that you won't live to regret? Is there an effective way to respond to difficult people that won't get you fired or ruin your own reputation or get you arrested? Is there a way to deal with difficult people that will not compromise your faith?

There was a time in my life when I was struggling with a difficult person and I was asking those same questions. At that time, I came across a passage of scripture that changed everything for me. The passage liberated me and enabled me to respond to difficult people effectively and appropriately. But not only that! The new insight I gained actually helps me receive a blessing whenever I deal with difficult people. That's right. You heard me correctly. This passage helps me receive a blessing when I deal with difficult people.

I want to share this passage with you today because I believe if you apply the wisdom of the text, you can also be liberated and receive a blessing when dealing with difficult people. So, let's jump right in. The text can be found in 1st Peter, chapter 3. 1st Peter is a great book to read when dealing with difficult people because it was written to persecuted Christians who were being pounced on by all kinds of difficult people. Christians had been thrown out of Jerusalem and were spread out all over Asia Minor and they were being persecuted by the Roman government. These Christians claimed Jesus as Lord, and, for the Romans, only Caesar was Lord. So the writer of 1st Peter shares how they should respond to those who are against them.

1st Peter 3:9a: **“Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing.”** Wow! This was an epic idea then and it is an epic idea today. When these words were written, it was lawful to retaliate, to get even with someone who went against you. Today, that seems like acceptable behavior, too. Yet 1st Peter says, “As followers of Christ that is not an option for you. We don't retaliate. In fact, we go one

step further. We respond to insults and evil with goodness and love.”

1st Peter 3:9b: **“It is for this you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.”** So as followers of Christ, we are *called* to respond this way—to respond to evil with goodness. It is not a suggestion, or an idea, or an option. It is a command from Christ. We are called! But if the idea seems difficult or impossible, you need to know you will receive a blessing by responding this way. What is the blessing? Let’s keep reading:

For whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it.
—1st Peter 3:10–11

The writer of 1st Peter is quoting a Psalm here. It seems like a tall task to always seek peace, especially when you are faced with a difficult person. When you are faced with that difficult person who is driving you up the wall, seeking peace is the last thing on your mind! How can you do it? Well, watch what 1st Peter says next.

1st Peter 3:12a: **For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.** How do we repay evil with a blessing? By understanding that God is watching us, cheering for us, pulling for us, sending power to us. How? Through prayer! God is attentive to our prayers. Now, there is a concept! Have you prayed for a person who is difficult? Have you ever prayed for God to help you with a person who is difficult? It works! Let’s keep reading.

1st Peter 3:15: **Do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.** 1st Peter reinforces the fact that we do not act on our own power. We should not be afraid or intimidated by difficult people. When we allow our hearts to draw closer to Christ and his love, he will give us the power to respond to insult with a blessing.

1st Peter 3:15: **But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.** This verse is amazing. When we choose to respond to evil with a blessing, it is going to turn heads. It is going to get attention because no one acts this way. In fact, it may embarrass the difficult person. When we rise above the crowd and respond to insults and criticism with love and goodness, people are going to notice and there is a good chance they are going to wonder what is different about us. So we must be prepared to tell them why we act the way we do. So, what do we tell them? 1st Peter tells us in verse 18.

1st Peter 3:18: **For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.** That’s what you tell them.

For, you see, all of us can be difficult. All of us can be abrasive and insensitive. All of us can be impossible to deal with. And how did Christ respond to us? With unbelievable love, grace and mercy! We repay evil and insults with a blessing because that is what Christ has done for us. So often we forget this. When we are dealing with a difficult person we forget we can be difficult, too. We are not as hard on ourselves as we are on others. But as we draw closer to Christ and his love, we remember what Christ has done for us.

Here is the message for today: **We are never more like Christ than when we love the unlovely.** We are never more like Christ than when we respond to evil with goodness—when we return insult with a blessing. Your response to difficult people will either betray your faith in Christ or reveal it. Responding to difficult people is perhaps your greatest opportunity to witness to the power of God’s love in Jesus Christ. If you don’t respond the right way, you may miss the best opportunity to share the love of Christ. Your life is your message. How you respond to difficult people is your sermon!

So, let me get down to how this works. In a few days you may be around the Thanksgiving table with people that are difficult. You may have to face a difficult person at work tomorrow. You may have to be around someone who is very difficult. Here is what you do:

Pray Persistently. Today, start praying for that person and ask God to help you respond lovingly to that person. It is amazing what can happen when we pray for difficult people. God will help us. Praying for a difficult person also helps us humanize them. For the truth is “Hurt people hurt people.” When we, through prayer, are able to recognize that oftentimes people are difficult because they are hurting inside, it helps us gain understanding and sensitivity.

Respond Respectfully. Now I want to give you a few guaranteed responses to difficult people that will disarm them in a respectful way. Not possible? It certainly is. Next time you are faced with a difficult person who begins speaking in a hurtful manner or says some inappropriate things, try these out: **“That’s interesting. Tell me more.” “That’s interesting. Why would you say that?” “That’s interesting. Why would you ask that?” “I want to hear everything you have to say, just not in that manner.”** These responses have the potential to deflate the negative emotion in the room and draw attention to the unkindness, but in a respectful manner. Nine times out of 10 these responses will help get you out of a jam.

Compliment Courageously. Okay, this may seem impossible to do, but it can work wonders. Next time you are faced with a difficult person try to find something about them you appreciate and tell them.

Why? Here is the thing. Sometimes people are difficult because they do not feel appreciated or valued. When they feel appreciated, oftentimes they release whatever resentment they are holding on to.

I remember a man at another church I served who caused much turmoil for me. It seemed he was against me from the start. If I voted yes, he voted no. If I voted no, he voted yes. He made things very difficult for me. I prayed, "Lord, help me deal with this man. What should I do?"

Shortly after I began praying for this man, there was a fall festival at the church. I walked around to the different booths, admiring the arts of crafts created by those in the congregation. The man I was praying for had a booth full of paintings he had done. They were portraits. I had no idea he was a painter and a good one at that! I asked him to show me his paintings and tell me about them, and he did with great enthusiasm.

The next day I sent him a note, thanking him for showing me his paintings. I also told him how much I appreciated his gift for painting. I couldn't believe what happened next. He told everyone about the note and never gave me any more trouble. In fact, he became my biggest supporter!

That was a huge blessing to me! And that is what the Bible promises to us. We will inherit a blessing when we love the unlovely. The blessing may be a renewed relationship. The blessing may be being a witness of the love of Christ. The blessing may be recognizing the power of God working through you in a difficult situation. But there will always be a blessing when we choose to love the unlovely.

Imagine this world if every Christian decided to love the unlovely. Just imagine. We are never more like Christ than when we love the unlovely. Amen.



11180 Medlock Bridge Road Johns Creek, GA 30097
770-497-8215 www.johnscreekumc.org