

Learning to Love Difficult People

Text: *Romans 12:9-21*

(This lesson is based on a book by Milton Jones published by College Press.
Outline developed by John Smith; adapted and revised by Paul R. Blake.)

Introduction:

1. *Matthew 22:34-40*

a. I don't have much problem with the "Love the Lord" part of this passage, but I must admit that I have had some neighbors and brethren that are nearly impossible to love. Does God really expect me to love them?

1) "Sometimes the hardest place to be a Christian is in the church."

b. *Matthew 5:43-48*

c. Sounds like we have to learn to love the unlovable.

2. Saying we need to love the unlovable is much easier than doing it.

Illustration: A college professor told the following story on himself. For years whenever he saw a parent scolding or punishing a child, he would tell them, "You should love your child, not punish him." One hot summer afternoon the professor was doing some repair work on a concrete driveway leading to his garage. Tired out after several hours of work, he laid down the trowel, wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and started toward the house. Just then out of the corner of his eye he saw a mischievous little boy putting his foot into the fresh cement. He rushed over, grabbed the boy, and was about to spank him when a neighbor leaned from a window and said, "Watch it, Professor! Don't you remember? You must love the child!" At this, he yelled back furiously, "I do love him in the abstract, but not in the concrete."

3. Who am I talking to?

a. Those who have been hurt by:

- 1) the shallow arrogant,
- 2) the disadvantaged dishonest
- 3) the treacherous plotters
- 4) the thoughtless simpletons

b. This lesson is for those who are trying to deal with difficult people.

1) Other lessons will address people who are difficult.

4. Loving those we find irritating is not easy. Doesn't seem natural. How do we do it?

a. We must have the capacity to do it, or else God would not have asked us to do it.

5. Consider principles from *Romans 12*.

a. But first, let's do a reality check from a Scriptural perspective.

I. RECOGNIZE THAT OUR BURDEN IS NOT UNIQUE

A. We are not the first & only people asked to love the unlovely, or deal with unreasonable, difficult people.

1. David and Saul

a. Saul threw a spear at David. Not once but twice.

1) *1Sam. 18:10-16, 19:8-10*

b. Sent men to kill him - *19:11-17*.

- c. Went himself - *19:18-24*.
- d. Sent his son to kill him - *20:1-11*.
- e. And chased him for years.
- f. Yet, on two occasions, David deliberately chose to spare Saul's life - *1Sam. 24:1-7; 26:1*.
- g. And even grieved when he died - *2Sam. 1:11*.
- h. When was the last time someone threw a spear at you? Sent hired assassins after you? Out of jealousy some one turned against you? Hurling hurtful words at you? Schemed behind your back to get other people not to like you?

2. Apostle Paul

- a. Escaped his own countrymen by being let down through an opening in the wall in a basket - *Acts 9:23-25*.
- b. Stoned in Lystra and left for dead instigated by some of his own countrymen who had hunted him down - *Acts 14:19-22*.
- c. While in prison, he was deserted by all of the disciples with the exception of Luke - *2Tim. 4:9-11*.
 - 1) Brethren made life difficult for him - *Phil. 1:16*.
- d. When was the last time you were run out of town by an angry mob? Were stoned or imprisoned? Deserted? No? What about...
 - 1) Last time openly made fun of you because you tried to do what was right? Ridiculed because you took an unpopular stand? Were excluded from the group?

3. Jesus Christ

- a. Came with the purest & greatest of motives - *Luke 19:10*.
 - 1) Yet was rejected - *John 1:5,11*.
 - 2) Even in his hometown - *Luke 4:16-30*.
- b. Falsely accused on all manner of wrong doing and often had His motives called into question.
 - 1) Breaking Sabbath when He healed a man - *Matt. 12:9-14*.
- c. Finally, betrayed, deserted, arrested, misunderstood, beaten, mocked, and then executed in cruelty.
- d. When was the last time you arrested on totally false charges? Beaten? Tortured? No? How about...
 - 1) Someone ever twist your motives for trying to do what was right? Insulted you, mocked you? Tried to hurt you or your reputation with trumped up charges? Was just flat out cold and mean-spirited to you?

B. Take courage from the fact that you are not alone.

- 1. *1Cor. 10:13; Heb. 12:1-3*
- 2. Jesus has not asked us to do anything that He did not do Himself.

II. RECOGNIZE THAT PEOPLE ARE NOT THE PROBLEM

A. Our struggle is with evil.

- 1. *Eph. 6:12*

2. Challenge is to see the evil rather than the person. Separate the sin from the sinner.
 3. Satan will use the sin the lives of others to tempt us to sin. Will use the non-believer as well as those within our own spiritual family.
 - a. *Matthew 18:21; Rom. 12:21*
- B. God's will and word heals bad relationships.
1. In light of *Romans 3:23*, it should not surprise us when someone treats us badly.
 - a. Because all have sinned, everyone has the potential of inflicting hurt. Jabez - *1Chron. 4:10*
 - b. Have you ever sinned? Do you see a halo?
 - c. Then you have caused pain, the same kind of pain others inflicted on you when they sinned.
 - d. I have found that people who get the angriest and howl the loudest when someone hurts them, often hurt others themselves thoughtlessly or they rationalize it into justification.
 2. People are going to do bad things to us. That is unavoidable. We have no control over that.
 - a. What we can control is how we respond to it.
 3. When bad things happen, we must remember that we are not to be overcome by evil, we are to overcome evil regardless of its form.
 4. If we look to God's word, we can find the strength & strategy to overcome evil with good.
 - a. *Romans 12* helps us to find & understand that strategy.
 - b. "The real test in golf, and in life, is not keeping out of the rough, but in getting out after we are in. (John Moore)
 5. Do we mean it when we pray as did David: "He leadeth me beside the still waters... though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..." (*Psalms 23:2*)?
- C. Must choose weapons that are good, not evil.
1. *2Cor. 10:1-5*
 2. If we are going to duel with the Devil we must choose our weapons carefully.
 3. Should not use evil when wronged for two reasons:
 - a. Evil is not as powerful as good.
 - 1) Man who brought a knife to a gun fight.
 - 2) *1John 4:4*
 - b. Our objective is to destroy evil, not create more of it.
 - 1) Doing evil puts us on the wrong side.
 - 2) When we return evil for good, we play right into the enemy's hands.
- D. Respond with aggressive good.
1. Faith without works is dead. Likewise, love in the absence of deeds is not love at all.
 - a. It is not enough for us to simply refrain from doing evil, we must set out to do good aggressively.

b. *Rom. 12:14; 1Cor. 4:11-13*

2. Consider the example of the Good Samaritan:

a. First two (priest & Levite) encounter the wounded man & chose not to get involved. Didn't hurt, but didn't help, either. Refused to get involved because involvement would require something of them... personal sacrifice.

1) "What will happen to **me** if I help?"

2) Was the Lord satisfied with their behavior?

b. Samaritan viewed his role differently.

1) "What will happen to **him** if I help?"

2) Was willing to help his enemy.

3) *Proverbs 25:21-22 - "If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the LORD shall reward thee."*

4) Eerdman writes: "The sinner is benefited by the clemency shown to him, and requital of evil by good brings the offender to a better mind, and aids in his spiritual life. Coals of fire are a metaphor for the penetrating pain of remorse and repentance. The un-merited kindness which he receives forces upon him the consciousness of his ill-doing, which is accompanied by the sharp pain of regret" (vol. 9, pg. 484).

c. "Good" is when we get our focus off of doing good for ourselves and look toward doing good for someone else, even if we can't stand that person.

3. We worry about what will happen to us if the world doesn't start treating us better.

a. Have we ever worried about what is going to happen to the world if WE don't do good?

b. This is tough stuff. It is not for the faint of heart.

c. We will examine *Romans 12* to find ways we can control our emotional and spiritual reactions to evil.

Romans 12 & The Strategy For Getting Along With Others

I. "BLESS AND DO NOT CURSE" - *Romans 12:14*

A. Must strive for the discipline to control our words as well as our actions.

1. Doubt that any of you have walked up to a person who has been gossiping about you and punched them out. Drive by shooting because someone spoke harshly to you.

2. Controlling our actions is not nearly as difficult as controlling how we react verbally to someone.

3. *James 3:2-12*

4. The starting place for this battle is in our mouths. Therefore, the first step to overcoming evil and loving difficult people is to win the war of words.

a. No by yelling louder, or being more vicious, or more clever.

B. What is meant by cursing?

1. Three ways we could be guilty of "cursing" as used in this context:
 - a. Ask God to damn another person or treat them harshly,
 - b. Say mean, hurtful things about a person to someone else or curse them in the hearing of another,
 - c. Hurl verbal abuse directly at them.
 2. "Sticks & stones may hurt by bones, but words will never harm me."
 - a. Remember saying that when someone was saying bad things about you? Not true is it! Words do hurt.
- C. What is meant by blessing?
1. The opposite of cursing.
 - a. Saying good things about a person in prayer to God.
 - b. Speaking good things about them in the presence of others.
 - c. Saying kind things directly to them.
 2. I know of no better way to bless a person then to pray for them. May not change the current treatment, but you and your attitude toward them will change in the process.
 3. Consider these examples:
 - a. *Luke 23:34* - Jesus on the cross
 - b. *Acts 7:60* - Stephen while being stoned
 - c. *Job 42:10* - after being slandered by his three counselors
 4. *1Cor. 4:12-13*
 5. To the world we will seem like fools when we say good things about those who do evil to us.
 - a. This does not mean that we ignore or excuse away sin; we simply discipline how we respond verbally to it.
 6. *Matthew 12:37*
 7. In our conversations, we need to listen to ourselves.
 - a. "Do I really come across that way? Did I really say that?"
 - b. Managing our mouths is easy to understand, but tough to practice.

II. "BE OF THE SAME MIND TOWARD ONE ANOTHER" - *Romans 12:15-16*

- A. Put yourself in the other person's place and try to understand them.
1. Usually, it is not a question of whether or not what they did was wrong. It probably was wrong.
 - a. But why did they do it? That question needs to be answered.
 - b. Won't take away the harm done, nor will it make the person's actions right.
 - c. Stephen Covey wrote, "Seek first to understand, then seek to be understood."
 2. Understanding the person's reasons will help you discipline your reaction.
 - a. It will make it easier for you bless & curse not.
 3. Understanding reasons will often open up your heart and prevent sin.
 - a. Woman crying during Bible Study and showing little interest. Had just found out that her younger sister had cancer.

- b. Man in subway with out-of-control kids. Just come from hospital where his wife had died.
 - c. Leaving the wood-shop and going to worship in my work clothes.
- B. Understand why they have acted and provide food or drink, rather than harsh criticism.
 - 1. Some people do inappropriate things to get attention or affection.
 - a. If we return evil for evil, how is anyone helped; how have we pleased God?
 - 2. Knowing why will help us return good for evil.
 - 3. Strive for the discipline to restrain the impulse to be critical or lash out until we understand.
 - a. Again, this does not mean that we ignore or excuse sin.
 - b. Understanding motives does not lessen the guilt of sin.
- C. Join with others in their emotions.
 - 1. Spouse comes home from work & is a terrible grouch. Barks at you and then sits down to completely shut you out. Hurts right? Why are they in such a bad mood?
 - 2. They need your empathy not your criticism.
 - 3. Why do you think God told us to share in others' joys and sorrows?
 - a. We are vulnerable to sin when at emotional highs and lows; therefore, we need others there to help us bear them.
 - b. *Ecc. 4:9-12*

III. "DO NOT AVENGE YOURSELVES" - *Romans 12:17-19*

- A. Revenge is not our responsibility.
 - 1. Revenge is one of the names God wears.
 - a. Yahweh Gmolah - *Jer. 51:56; Deut. 32:35*
 - 2. Vengeance always belongs to God, and never belongs to us.
 - 3. Revenge is not bad. It just isn't our job.
 - 4. Not taking revenge does not mean that we sit back and let evil walk all over us. Letting God take revenge doesn't mean that we never rebuke sin or exercise local church discipline.
 - a. *Eph. 5:11; 1Tim. 5:20*
 - 5. We are not in the punishing business; that's God's jurisdiction.
- B. We must trust God to right our wrongs.
 - 1. There is never a time when we need to put on the judicial robes and right the wrongs done to us.
 - 2. If God is the judge, then we need to accept His rulings. He will take care of the situation. He sees everything, knows everything, and is perfectly equipped to be the judge.
- C. Why should we let God be the judge?
 - 1. Our actions might interfere with the sinner's progress toward repentance.
 - 2. Taking revenge is sinful and brings us under God's condemnation.
 - 3. We are in no position to judge the difficult person; we don't know what is in their heart; we don't know what they deserve.

- a. Our knowledge of any situation is at best partial, but God knows all - *Hebrews 4:12-13*.
- 4. God heals sinners.
 - a. He can make the bitter sweet (*Ex. 15:25-26*), even relationships.
 - b. Yahweh Rapha - "The Lord who heals."
 - c. *Psa. 147:3*
- 5. Commenting on *Romans 12:20* - Moses Lard wrote: "By this course, you will certainly conquer the evil which is in yourself, and you may conquer that which is in him."
- 6. Saul throws a spear at David & what does David do besides duck? He doesn't throw it back. Resist the temptation to seek revenge.
- 7. Lots of spears are thrown at us by means of penetrating words, selfish deeds, arrogant treatment. What do we do? Don't throw back!

IV. "PROVIDE THINGS GOOD IN THE SIGHT OF ALL MEN" - *Romans 12:17*

- A. NASV - "Plan ahead to do what is fine in the sight of all men."
 - 1. Someone has wronged us, and we know we will see them again.
 - a. Instead of stewing over the hurt or plotting revenge...
 - b. Sit down, think the situation through, get some ideas and come up with a plan to do good and win your brother.
 - 2. Be in control of the situation, instead of letting circumstances control us.
 - 3. *1Thes. 5:14-15*
 - a. Don't simply do or say the first things that comes to mind (or mouth). Plan ahead. Pray ahead. Search for the right thing.
 - b. Remember that we are involved in a battle, and sin is the enemy.
 - c. Don't face the enemy without a battle plan.
- B. Do what is beneficial for the enemy.
 - 1. Isn't that what God did for us? - *Romans 5:6-9*.
 - a. Am I a child of my Father?
 - 2. Plan some kind word, kind deed to show that we are different. We will not be overcome by evil, but will rather overcome evil with good.
- C. In the sight of all men.
 - 1. Your response should be so profound that it not only moves our enemy, but also others who observe it.
 - 2. Reaction of the centurion at the death of Jesus, "Truly this was the Son of God."
 - 3. Think of the times in the life of Jesus that His enemies could not find anything in His life that was grounds for accusation.
 - 4. We need to think through the situations where we are most likely to blow up, clam up, sass up, and plan out a strategy for what we are going to do the next time we see the person. This will astound and confound friend and enemy alike.

V. "LIVE PEACEABLY WITH ALL MEN" - *Romans 12:18*

- A. Live at peace is the goal.

1. We should strive to win the war by planning good things, and also should make plans for living at peace.
 - a. Peace is not the absence of conflict.
 - b. It is the active pursuit and dedicated maintenance of fellowship.
 2. A cease-fire is not peace.
 3. *Hebrews 12:14*
 4. Our goal should be the restoration of relationships by turning enemies into allies.
 5. *Matthew 5:9; Acts 26:29; Romans 10:1*
- B. If it is possible...
1. Doing everything we have talked about so far is no guarantee that our relationships will be healthy and prosperous. We may manage our mouths, see things from the other person's perspective, never take revenge, and plan good responses, and still find that the difficult person simply becomes more difficult.
 2. There are limits to our efforts in seeking peace.
 - a. We cannot take control of the other person's reactions.
 - b. Must not compromise Biblical values & morals for the sake of peace.
 3. If you do good to a person who has wronged you, one of two things will happen:
 - a. They will change.
 - b. They won't change.
 4. That's pretty simple. If they change, that is what you wanted. If they won't change, at least you can live with yourself and God because you did the right thing.
 5. I would rather face God having tried to live at peace.

VI. "GIVE..." - *Romans 12:20*

- A. Find a need in the life of the other person.
 1. In this text, we find an enemy who is hungry or thirsty. Our enemies may not lack these things, but they will lack something. May not be literal food for which they are hungering.
 2. This will help you take the focus off yourself and force you to try to understand the other person.
- B. Look at our resources.
 1. What do we have to give? Take an inventory of our resources.
 2. Look at your funds, possessions, time, life, etc. See what you have that can be used to help your enemy. Then go back to #4 and plan ahead to do something kind to them.
 3. Isn't that what God did? Saw our need of salvation. Took inventory of heaven, and found His Son, and then sent Him.
- C. Heap!
 1. Heap the coals means a lot of coals.
 2. One kind deed, a few sweet words forced out probably will not do the trick. Heap it on!

3. Perhaps a reference to ancient Bedouin sign of homage where hot coals are given to anyone who has no fire. Commenting on this, Dan Allender in *Bold Love* states: "Evil cannot tolerate the intrusion of goodness. Evil has its own snarl, dress code, favorite beer, and sports team, and when someone comes into its lair sporting a smile, out of fashion wide lapels, and a root beer, it can hardly bear to coexist with this alien and stranger. It depends on its ability to mock and shame the intruder into retreat. In other words, goodness has the power to expose and shame the one who did harm. Shame is the experience of having the curtain lifted and being recognized as the wizard of a sham kingdom. For that reason, I understand the metaphor of heaping burning coals on the head to mean offering goodness that surprises, supplants, and shames the sin of the one who does harm, lest it remain and destroy his heart. Shame can be a severe mercy, a gift of sight that either hardens or softens the heart."