

# Difficult People: Gotta Love ‘Em!

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Pentecost IV, June 12, 2005

## Matthew 5:38-48; 7:1-5 NIV

You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. . . .

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

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I need to begin this message with a disclaimer. I’m going to be talking about how to deal with difficult people. But I don’t want anyone to think I’m doing so as a response to anything I’ve encountered during my eleven months as your interim minister. To the contrary, you people have been a delight to work with and this time with you has been the most rewarding pastoral experience I have ever had, bar none! The love and respect and courtesy shown to Shirley Anne and me since we took on this assignment have been nothing short of astounding. We have one more week with you, and then we turn things over to your new pastor and his family. That’s the goal we’ve all been working toward for a year, and we rejoice that at last the diligent efforts of your Search Committee, and so many others, are bearing fruit. But you will forgive me if I admit to you what Shirley Anne knows already — that I’ve had a few moments of melancholy of late, thinking about the transition coming up in our lives.

No, the impetus for this message came from another source. I simply realized that I needed to try a different kind of sermon from what I usually do. As you know, I’m very big on the Christian seasons and the liturgical year, I have a keen interest in the structure and rationale of Christian worship, and my mind is filled with “theological miscellany” that’s likely to spill out more often than not. So my sermons have been mostly on the theoretical or academic side, trying to provide a base for thinking about foundational Christian truths. I’m not the sort of preacher who can easily come up with practical “how to” stuff — topics like “Ten easy steps to financial blessing,” or “How to get rid of a bad habit,” or “Five ways to overcome discouragement.”

For one thing, *I’m not sure I know* any of those things, or a dozen other topics like them. I struggle, just as you do, in walking the Christian walk, and I don’t like to pretend I have a formula for solving any of life’s problems with a snappy series of bullet points. But I would like to take things down to a more everyday level in this message. Recently another of our northern Illinois C.C.C.C. pastors, Bruce Goettsche of Union Church of La Harpe, published his fourth book, co-written with his son Rick. It’s called *Difficult People: Dealing with Those Who Drive You Crazy*. It occurred to me that this might be a good topic to get practical with. I’ve skimmed through the Goettsches’ book, but I’m not really borrowing much from it today except the idea.

All of us have had to deal with difficult people at one time or another — irresponsible family members, touchy fellow workers, unreasonable bosses, cranky neighbors, harsh teachers, disrespectful students, snotty sales people, complaining customers, aggressive drivers, self-important officials. And even — God help us! — difficult church members! As a pastor in my younger days, I had my share of those! There was Helen, who lived across the street in our small New England town and kept her eye on the parsonage. When the furnace acted up in the dead of winter I had to monkey with it to keep it going, and she complained to the church board about “Mr. Leonard playing with his tinker toys.” (I guess we were supposed to freeze to death instead?) Then there was Marion, the treasurer in another church, who

became so hostile to me that she tried to withhold my salary — or the nominal stipend that was euphemistically referred to as my salary — until the Bishop intervened. And there was Joe in my western Illinois parish. I tried to make a few changes when I came to that church, such as asking the Board to meet in the well-lighted basement instead of the dim parlor at the back of the church. For this and other things, Joe became so angry at me that after church services he would leave by the side door rather than shake my hand at the main entrance. It really galled him when I beat him to the door and made him shake my hand anyway. The list could go on and on.

In fact, difficult people in the church were part of the reason I had to leave the active ministry and go into other work, because one of those difficult people was my senior pastor in a large church. He took it into his head that I was trying to steal his congregation away from him — as if I were capable of that — and had his rubber-stamp church council boot me out.

I had been a Christian then for about five years, and you would think by that time I would have begun to develop the ability to cope with difficult people. Perhaps I had, to a degree. I went to work for Rand McNally and after only a few months there Kathy, another employee, developed an intense dislike for me, so much so that the boss called our work group into a meeting where Kathy could air her complaints — which, by the way, I don't remember. At the same time I was dealing with two teenage stepdaughters at home for whom, it seemed, Dad could do nothing right. Talk about difficult people! On top of that we were in debt for medical expenses, having credit cards cancelled and getting calls from collection agencies — it was the kind of situation that makes you want to crawl into a hole and rake the dirt over you.

But I stuck it out, and things got better. The hostile worker didn't exactly become president of my fan club, but she got married and quit the job. I even attended her wedding. Later, one of the other employees told me I had conducted myself well in the situation and what happened hadn't been my fault. That made me feel better about it, because I had tried to rely on the Lord through it all and I was glad I had maintained a testimony. I think that was almost the first time I ever reacted to a difficult person without trying to justify myself or to get back at them in some way, as I would have earlier. I was a relatively new Christian, and I was learning.

Dealing with family difficulties took longer — don't they always? Other people you can shut out of your life, but family sticks around. There were more bumps along the road, but the day came when I stood in a courtroom in Chicago and adopted the stepdaughters and their brothers and made them my own, and today we're a pretty close family. That doesn't mean I've always agreed with the life choices my family members have made. But I've learned that the important thing is the family relationship, not the particular issue.

I'm telling you all of this only for one reason: to establish the fact that in suggesting some ways of dealing with difficult people, I'm not pontificating from some theoretical ivory tower. I've been there, done that. All my life, it seems, I've been a kind of "lightning rod" for difficult people — people who developed a dislike for me for reasons often beyond my comprehension, and who made things discouraging for me with complaints, putdowns, and even job termination. Strangely, it hasn't happened here at Union Congregational Church. After all, I'm only the interim minister, so why waste time getting mad at me? I'll be gone soon enough anyway! Or maybe all the difficult people have already left the church over other issues and I just happened along at the right time. Or maybe it's because most of you folks just have a level of Christian maturity that prevents you from being a difficult person. I would like to think *that's* the real reason! But it still might be helpful to review some things I think I've learned about dealing with difficult people. These are interrelated and overlapping ideas, so I'll cover them in no particular order.

(1) First of all, remember that we don't live in the Garden of Eden any more. Paradise hasn't yet been restored, and sin and pride still affect us big time. Jesus said we would always have the poor with us, and like the poor, difficult people will always be with us on this mortal coil. People who make things hard for us are just a fact of life. Whether family members, neighbors, church members, people at work or at school or in the community, difficult people aren't going away any time soon. So you might as well get used to them. Don't try to run away from the problem; learn to "stick it out." That's especially important in a marriage; the damage done to our families, especially to children, in a culture of "throw-away" marriages is beyond calculation. But the principle of "sticking it out" applies in other situations as well, such as my job with Rand McNally. Sometimes problems do go away if we simply tough it out and wait long enough. "Time heals all things" — or, at least, a lot of things.

(2) Secondly, understand why people can be difficult. Usually, people who make things hard for you don't have an issue with you so much as they have *an issue with themselves*. Often they're hurting. They feel they've been slighted or wronged, or they feel ignored and insignificant. Making things hard for other people is their way of trying to feel important, and they wouldn't need to do that if they had a sense of

their own worth. The reason people act like jerks is that they really don't like themselves. The worst thing you can do, when people become hard to get along with, is to criticize or belittle them or throw back in their face a catalogue of all their faults. They already know their shortcomings and that's why they're being difficult. Try to put yourself in their place, understand the pressures they're under, and give them a break. You're not *excusing* their difficult behavior, but you're understanding where it's coming from and not taking it so personally.

(3) The third thing is this: *Pick your difficulties wisely*. Some things are worth getting upset about, and some aren't. In the church, for example, if somebody starts being difficult by acting in a flagrantly immoral manner, or by promoting non-Christian ideas or beliefs, that's something that has to be dealt with. Things that touch the core of our Christian faith and practice are serious matters, and Jesus gave us a procedure for dealing with people who so disturb the peace of the church. But most of the difficulties we encounter when dealing with others in the church don't have much to do with such momentous issues. They're matters of personality, or style, or preference. Somebody has an idea that's different from yours, or does things in a way you wouldn't do them, or has a different priority from yours. Is it such a big issue that they become, for you, a difficult person? Learn to let people be who they are, and don't try to force them into your mold. For God's sake — and I mean for *God's sake* — *cut them some slack!* As Count Niklaus Ludwig Von Zinzendorf said, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Don't label another believer as a difficult person just because they disagree with you or have mannerisms that make you uncomfortable. You and your fellow believer are servants of the same Lord, and as Paul asks, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls" (Romans 14:4).

(4) Fourth, when difficult people bug you, remember what's really important. In the church, for example, what's important is that the work of God goes forward. The apostle Paul questioned the motives of some of his fellow preachers. "Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry," he said, "but others from good will" (Philippians 1:15). But, he added, in any case *Christ is proclaimed*, whatever the motivation, and that's cause for rejoicing. Jonah was a difficult person — running away from his call, becoming angry because God didn't punish the Ninevites, complaining to God about a worm — yet the Lord still used him to bring people to himself. Sometimes people seem to be difficult because they're *passionate* about the church and its faith. What's more important — your reaction to them, or the advance of the gospel? It seems that one person's passion can be another person's poison. But if nobody's passionate about the faith around here, this church is in big trouble.

The principle of relative importance comes into play in the family, too, as it does in other areas of life. Spouses or children can disappoint us with the priorities they adopt, the habits they develop, and the choices they make. With a family of our size, we've had to deal with that! Of course, I would have liked it if my kids could have become a carbon copy of me, but it doesn't work that way, does it? It was difficult for me when my youngest son converted to the Catholic Church. Since then he has a habit of needling Shirley and me at family gatherings about how we need to "come home to Rome." There were times when I felt like disowning him! I had to be confronted with the question: What's the most important thing? Of course, it's not the things that bug me that are most important. What's important is the *relationship* — the family bond. The church is a family, too. When other people in the church start to drive us crazy, we need to remind ourselves that *we're family*, brothers and sisters, and that bond is what's really important — not our picky preferences.

(5) In the fifth place, when you encounter difficult people maintain your *sense of humor*. Really, this follows from the previous principle — remembering what's really important. Sometimes we get upset at other people because we take things too seriously. Or, worse, we take *ourselves* too seriously. So when somebody steps on our toes it's like the end of the world. But is the matter really as important as all that? Can't we just laugh it off, and go on? And it is laughable — the things people do, and the things they take offense at! I was fired from my last academic job as dean of a graduate school because the head of the school got upset about a minor administrative problem. Now, I was the one who called his attention to the problem; he would never have known about it if I hadn't told him, because eventually it was all cleared up. But, funny thing — I lost my part-time job! At the time, of course, I didn't see the humor in the situation, when I should have been able to just laugh it off. Taking myself, and my hurts, less seriously would have helped me get through it.

(6) That leads us to the sixth point: When people make things hard for you, remember who *you* are. After all, you aren't the center of the universe; you aren't God. Somebody makes a crack that seems to belittle or criticize you, or undercuts you, or goes behind your back, or persists in some form of behavior that bugs you or even does harm to you or people you care about. These are difficult things, no question, but *you* probably can't fix them. If you try to wade into those waters you may only muddy them up and make things worse. This might be the kind of thing you and I should leave to the Lord to straighten out.

There are some situations about which Jesus warned us, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer” (Mark 9:29). Besides, God looks at these situations from a different perspective, and from his angle what looks like a mountain to us may be just a molehill.

It’s hard to believe, I know, but the Lord loves that difficult person in your life just as much as he loves you. And he seeks that person’s welfare as well as yours. That’s why Jesus commanded us to *love* the difficult people in our lives. Love doesn’t mean a soupy, sentimental feeling toward these people. It means a *commitment* to their welfare, their good, their salvation. This commitment may require that you and I put our own feelings to one side and try to emulate God’s attitude in a difficult situation. Jesus told us we’re to strive for God’s perfection. That sounds presumptuous, but listen to how he explains it, in the Sermon on the Mount:

*I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:44-48).*

What’s God’s perfection in this situation? It’s a posture of impartiality, an attitude of fairness. It’s having the mind of Christ, who “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:6-7). It’s remembering who I am when people make things hard for me. They may be sinners, but so am I, and the apostle Paul’s words come ringing across the ages: “As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:13).

Yes, that’s the astounding revelation that comes to me when I remember all those difficult people in my life. Looking back at those hard situations, I realize that in many cases *I was the difficult person!* I made it hard for other people, I created a problem for them. As Jesus asked, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” When God gives us this kind of insight into ourselves, it becomes a lot easier to deal with difficult people — people who drive us crazy.

Scripture has more to say about this topic, but our time is gone. I’ll finish by reviewing our handy bullet points about dealing with difficult people:

1. Difficult people will always be with us, so don't try to run away from hard situations; stick it out.
2. Understand that the difficult person is probably hurting, too.
3. Pick your difficulties wisely; where people differ from you in nonessentials, cut them some slack.
4. When people make things hard for you, remember that the important thing is the relationship, not the issue.
5. Keep your sense of humor, and don't take yourself so seriously.
6. Give the difficult situation to the Lord. Remember that you're a sinner, too. God cares about you, but he also cares for that person who's bugging you. Try to see things from God's perspective.

Difficult people? Gotta love ‘em!

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