

# HOW TO NAVIGATE DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIPS

Various texts

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

November 20, 2016

## INTRODUCTION

The holiday season is upon us. With it, we experience the many joys of devoting ourselves to giving thanks to the Lord for all his blessings at Thanksgiving and remembering the meaning and significance of Jesus' birth at Christmas. But with all the joys of the season, we also know that this time of year can be stressful and filled with anxiety for many. There's stress with travel plans and gift giving and increased spending and more social commitments. Truly, some of these stresses are our own doing. But some of the stress this time of year comes from relationships. Families get together for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Co-workers get together for work parties. And when there is conflict in these relationships or where there aren't shared values and convictions, there can be increased stress and anxiety.

And that's a real problem. Not mainly because the stress makes you feel uncomfortable. But the main reason why stress and anxiety are problems is that they will hinder your worship. If you aren't worshipping, that's a huge problem. What God really wants from you is worship.

Since the holiday season often brings us into closer contact with difficult relationships, what does the Bible tell us about how to handle these difficult relationships? What guidance can the Scriptures give us to guide our speech and conduct? What are the biblical principles for navigating difficult relationships? That's what we want to look at this morning.

Now, we can't be exhaustive. We can't cover everything God has to say on the subject. We won't be able to cover how to *resolve* conflict, for example. But we do want to focus on principles for navigating difficult relationships. And we, of course, particularly have in mind those family members or co-workers or other people who are difficult to love during the holidays. But these principles apply to all kinds of difficult relationships regardless of the time of year. So let's look at 3 principles for navigating difficult relationships. The first one is. . .

## I. ORIENT YOUR COMPASS TO CHRIST

Have you ever navigated with a compass? When I was little I became certified as a Scuba diver. One of the exercises the instructor had us to was navigate with a compass underwater. We'd start atop the water and orient the compass to a flag in the water off in the distance. Then we'd sink down and swim toward the flag with only the compass guiding us.

If I had the compass on my wrist, I'd cross my arms and look down on the compass the whole time, never taking my eyes off of it, keeping the needle where it needed to be, and my partner would be the one looking out for us. If you were even slightly off, you'd never find the flag because by the time you swam the distance, you'd be too far to the left or right—beyond visibility of the marker.

The Christian life is like that. If we aren't properly oriented to Christ, our life will go askew.

Turn over to 1 Peter 3 and let me show you this. We can only just touch on this passage. Beginning in 3:13 Peter's main idea is how Christians should respond in a godly way to suffering. In the verse before (v. 12), Peter makes the point that God will punish evildoers and reward the righteous

3:12: "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

The righteous are those who trust Christ—they've been counted righteous by God. They are counted righteous because they have admitted their sin, repented of their sin, and bowed to Jesus as their Master. When that happens, Jesus' death covers your sin and God counts you as righteous in Christ. So because God is on the side of the righteous, in v. 13 Peter writes:

3:13: "Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?"

In other words, no one can ultimately harm those in Christ who are zealous for what is good. Whatever happens in this life:

- God will right the wrongs done to you.
- He'll bind up the broken-hearted.
- So your soul is safe and God is with you.

But v. 14 admits that during this life, we'll suffer even when we are zealous for what is good:

v. 14: "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. . . "

There is a guarantee of God's blessing. There is blessing to be had even in the suffering. The words "*will be*" don't indicate the blessing is reserved for the future, but rather the certainty of the blessing. So thinking about difficult relationships, you shouldn't hold back from doing good to them. Even if you suffer ridicule or shame or are shown ingratitude, know that you will be blessed of God.

Verse 14 continues: "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled," You aren't to be controlled by emotions of fear or turmoil as you relate to them. But rather, v15 says, "in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy." Honor. . . as holy. . . Christ the Lord. "Honor as holy" is the ESV's translation of the Greek verb *hagiazō*. It means to sanctify or set apart or consecrate. Peter is instructing us to 'set apart' Christ as Lord in our hearts. Now note the contrast in v. 14 and 15: Set apart Christ as Lord in contrast to fearing man and being troubled by man. The emotions of anxiously, fearing man are not, Peter says, compatible with setting apart Christ as Lord in your heart. So if we don't want to have fear or anxiety about difficult relationships, the solution is to set apart, revere, honor Christ as Lord in our hearts. See that?

That Christ is Lord means: That he is sovereign, he's in control, he has your good and his glory in mind because he's your Master. That our aim must be to obey in all circumstances. That he's the one I can trust in all circumstances. That the supreme object of my love must be Christ so that my love of Christ compels me to act in obedience to him and to trust him.

Have you meditated on Christ's Lordship to the extent that it has gripped your heart?

So to set apart Christ as Lord in your heart. Or to honor Christ the Lord as holy. Or to sanctify or consecrate Christ the Lord in your heart. Is all about worship.

And that's why I said earlier that stress and anxiety over difficult relationships is such a problem. Now we see why: because they hinder worship. These things are incompatible. How would we set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts—so that he is the sole object of worship, of adoration, of love, of trust?

The answer comes from Jesus himself. He uses the same verb (*hagiazō*) in a similar way in what's traditionally known as the Lord's prayer. In Mt 6:9, Jesus instructs to pray like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." Hallowed is the same verb as set apart, consecrate, sanctify. This is a request. We are to pray in this manner: "Father, set yourself apart / consecrate your name / let your name be treated with reverence and special honor..."

So Jesus teaches us to go to the Father and ask for it in prayer. We meditate on the Lordship of Christ *and* we ask our Father to help us sanctify Jesus' name in our heart so that we don't fear man. Pray to God like you mean it: "Help me Father to cherish your Son; help me to treasure Jesus; help me to worship even when I'm ridiculed or slandered or maligned or mistreated or ignored or put down; let my heart sing the praises of Jesus even more."

Setting apart Christ as Lord is what I'm calling orienting your compass to Christ. The compass of your heart must be trained on Jesus.

If we had time, we'd keep reading this paragraph and find more help. But I want to move on to a second principle for navigating difficult relationships. The first principle was to orient your compass to Christ.

Here's the second principle. . .

## **II. BRING YOUR LAMP AND A POCKETFUL OF SALT**

Go over to Matthew 5. You know where I'm headed—the passage on Christ-followers being salt and light beginning in v. 13. Jesus just described the blessing of being a true disciple of Christ in the Beatitudes (vv. 3-12). Now Jesus describes the responsibility of a true disciple. In a word, the responsibility, as we'll see, is influence. We are to influence the world as salt and light.

Jesus will say, "You are the salt of the earth. . . You are the light of the world." That is, every true disciple *is* salt and light in the world. That fact that we belong to Christ makes us salt and light in the world. The only issue is whether we'll be "tasteful salt and effective light." That is, will we be an influence?

The first way we are to influence the world is as salt.

v. 13: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."

What does Jesus mean by salt? What is it about salt that relates to being a Christian in the world?

Salt, in ancient days, was considered so valuable that Roman soldiers were often paid in salt. That's where the phrase "he's not worth his salt" comes from. One of its primary uses was a preserving agent. Fresh meat would go rancid unless something was done. So, even as some do today, salt was rubbed into the meat to preserve it. Salt killed the bacteria and kept the meat from spoiling.

Now, Jesus gave this sermon on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Not far from his location was a town the west side of the Sea of Galilee named Magdala (where Mary Magdalene was from). And this town was famous for its salted fish, which were exported all over. So Jesus is using a word picture that would have had significance to his audience.

Salt even was used in the ancient Near East to bind (preserve) a covenant between two parties. It symbolized preservation of the promises on both sides. We see examples of this practice, called a covenant of salt, in the Old Testament (2 Chr 13:5).

So Jesus is making the point that Christians are to be a preserving moral and spiritual influence in the world. Christians, through their pursuit of righteousness, act to preserve the world from the full effects of sin and evil. As you seek to follow Christ and live how God calls you to live, you will have the effect of restraining sin in the people around you. You won't laugh at the coarse jokes, and maybe they'll stop telling them. You won't participate in the gossip, and maybe the gossip vine dies. You elevate the conversation.

The way Paul says it in Col 4:6: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." So it's important to pursue righteous conduct and speech before even difficult people because in doing so you'll live out your calling as salt—a preserving influence on those around you. You don't want to be ineffective salt:

Mt 5:13: " "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."

Salt that wasn't pure—that was mixed with gypsum, for example—was repulsive to the taste and wasn't used on food, but thrown out and used as a kind of herbicide, such as on footpaths. So living as God would have you matters not only for your own sake, but for the sake of influence on those around you. You should live to maximally influence those around you for Christ.

The second way we are to influence the world is as light:

Mt 5:14-16: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

The light that shines from us is not a spectacular self, but (as we know from our study of John) the light of Jesus. Genesis 1:27 says we were made in God's image. That is, we were made like mirrors and we are to mirror forth God into the world. Sin distorted the mirror. Salvation begins to restore the mirror. So admittedly, we picture forth God imperfectly—but as we grow more like Christ, we shine the light of God brighter, more accurately into the world.

The world is dark. And you were made to bring light to a dark place. Paul says in Phil 2:15 that in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, we “shine as lights in the world.” And in Eph 5:8, “at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” (connected to the power source). Jesus’ true followers bring light to a darkened world. Which is why Jesus makes the analogy he does (v.14b) “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

There were cities all around Sea of Galilee, where Jesus was teaching. For example, on the east side was a city called Hippos located on a hill. The white stone work of the buildings made the city visible by day. The lights shining at night made it visible by night. You couldn’t miss it. “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” He goes on to say in v. 15:

"Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house."

Most people had one room homes and lamps to light them at night. It would be ridiculous to light a lamp and then hide it. No, you’d put it in a prominent place to give light to all in the room. Shining our light, then, is not an option for the Christian. It’s part of being a true follower of Christ.

Jesus didn’t call us to make communes. Jesus didn’t call us to become isolationists and only relate to the pure folks. No, Jesus gave the greatest of all commissions to “Go and make disciples of all nations. . .” Even the really heathen ones. Which means somebody has to get out of their bubble and go. Somebody has to penetrate the darkness with the light of Jesus shining from them. Somebody has to go to your unbelieving family members and those who don’t share your values. Somebody has to be a friend of sinners.

If you are a true disciple of Christ you are commanded by Jesus to (v. 16) “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” So here’s what’s at stake this Thanksgiving and this Christmas: Glorification of your Father who is at heaven. This isn’t just a meal with difficult people and people you hope your kids don’t grow up to be like. If you don’t go and shine, then how will they worship the God you know?

How do you navigate difficult relationships? First, orient your compass to Christ. Second, bring your lamp and a pocket full of salt. And now you’re ready to, thirdly. . .

### **III. FIND THE PATH OF LOVE**

Where else would we go but to the greatest words ever written about our love for others: 1 Corinthians 13. We’ll only just touch on this and make a few comments. Let’s jump to v. 4, where Paul gives a rich description of true, biblical love. He begins in verse 4 by describing love positively.

He says, “Love is patient.” Literally, love is ‘long-tempered’ or long-suffering. Love is able to endure more than small offenses. Love is able to endure the most egregious offenses.

Next, “Love is. . . kind.” Not only is love long-suffering, but it is actively kind. Kindness is a generous graciousness.

Then Paul begins to describe love in the negative—8 descriptions of what it isn't.

“Love does not envy.” Envy desires what's not rightly yours. It breeds rivalry. Envy competes for attention and affection. Envy wants not only more for yourself, but less for your rival. Envy tries to pull people onto your side of the conflict. Love cannot exist where there is envy.

“Love does not boast.” Love doesn't brag. Love doesn't boast about your accomplishments. Love doesn't call attention to oneself. Boasting tries to make others envious of us. If successful, boasting will cause others to love us less too.

Love “is not arrogant.” Literally, “it is not puffed-up.” Love isn't proud. Love and pride spring from different parts of your anatomy: Pride enlarges the head. Love enlarges the heart. Again, where there is pride there is not love.

Verse 5, Love is not “rude.” The word rude has the idea of behaving without grace. Someone who is rude doesn't care about the other person's feelings. Someone who is rude isn't considerate of the other person's sensitivities. Love follows the golden rule of treating others as you'd want to be treated. Rude speech is by definition not loving speech.

Love “does not insist on its own way.” This is the key description among the negative descriptions. Love isn't self-seeking. Love desires to seek good for others. Love seeks good even for enemies.

Paul says this in Php 2:4: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Love “is not irritable.” The word means easily angered or easily provoked. There is, of course, righteous indignation. Paul says, “Be angry and do not sin.” But love is not easily offended.

Peter says in 1 Pe 4:8: "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."

Not every wrong must be confronted. Loving people are not contentious people.

Love is not “resentful.” Other translations capture this better: love “keeps no record of wrongs.” This is an accounting term. So many people have ledger relationships. You know what a ledger is? Like with your checkbook and you record all your expenditures. People treat relationships like that. They remember wrongs in detail. They are always keeping a record. They are resentful. And they are quick to remind you of all the ways you've wronged them in the past. People who write ledgers catalogue even the most petty offenses. If you even lovingly confront these people about their sin, they will throw the book at you because all along they are keeping records and waiting to settle the score. That's not love.

Verse 6 comes as a couplet: love “does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.” Love isn't glad about evil. Love doesn't call what's good evil and what's evil good. Love doesn't turn sin into virtue and virtue into sin. Love doesn't enjoy depictions of sin on TV or in the movies. Love doesn't give approval by buying a ticket to a movie that you'd be ashamed to tell Jesus about. Love doesn't enjoy someone else's downfall.

Too often we're glad when someone who "deserves it" gets what's coming to them. Love watches Hillary Clinton concede and isn't moved to mock her but is moved with compassion by the humanity of it all. You may not love her politics and her character, but do you see the person you're called to love? If she met you, would she think you loved her? There has to be something about Christians that's distinctive even politically beyond our voting record. Voting isn't a fruit of the Spirit. But you know what is? Love.

Instead, love "rejoices with the truth." Love cherishes truth. Love proclaims truth. Love parades truth. And as if Paul hasn't nailed us and broken us already. If these verses haven't already felt radical, then under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he writes verse 7 and presses into us further. We can do an entire sermon just on these final four qualities of love.

v. 7: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

No doubt Paul is using hyperbole (exaggeration) to make a point. Clearly Paul doesn't mean we should bear, believe, hope and endure lies, false teachings, unrighteousness, and things contrary to God's will. But it's not accidental that Paul repeats the phrase "all things" 4 times. He's indicating that love has a constant disposition towards others.

"Love bears all things." That is, love protects and supports. Love cuts off gossip in order to protect someone. Love isn't out to exploit or to needlessly expose. Sure, love corrects and rebukes. But love is also willing to carry the pain and hurt.

"Love believes all things." Love believes the best. Love errs on the side of favoring the evidence that's most favorable to the other side. MacArthur comments: "Love is not suspicious or cynical. . . If there is doubt about a person's guilt or motivation, love will always opt for the most favorable possibility. If a loved one is accused of something wrong, love will consider him innocent until proven guilty. If he turns out to be guilty, love will give credit for the best motive."

"Love hopes all things." Love isn't hopeless. When they turn their back on you and on God, love has hope that God will turn them around. Love hopes for restoration.

"Love endures all things." Love doesn't stop loving. Love overcomes. Love is resilient. MacArthur once more: "Love bears what otherwise is unbearable; it believes what otherwise is unbelievable; it hopes in what otherwise is hopeless; and it endures when anything less than love would give up."

There's nothing sentimental about this passage. Love is a difficult doctrine to grasp. It's radical. Could a love so radical transform your relationship with the difficult people in your life?

## CONCLUSION

How will you navigate difficult relationships? The Bible gives us at least these three principles:

- Orient your compass to Christ.
- Bring your lamp and a pocket full of salt.
- Find the path of love.