

LEARNING TO RELATE TO DIFFICULT PEOPLE

SERIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF MODELS

By Doug Goins

*God's command to love each other is required of every man.
Showing mercy to a brother mirrors His redemptive plan.
In compassion He has given of His love that is divine;
On the cross sins were forgiven; Joy and peace are fully thine.*

These words from the hymn *Come, All Christians, Be Committed* by Eva B. Lloyd command us to exhibit certain behaviors in our relationships in the body of Christ. We are called to loving relationships that reflect the love of God shown toward us, to be merciful to one another as God is merciful to us, to reflect compassion, and as we have experienced the forgiveness of God, to mirror that same forgiveness. The blood shed on the cross forgives our sin. We are to forgive one another. This is not a suggestion in the Scripture or in the hymn but a strong command. The promise at the end results in a community that is peaceful and joyful, an encouraging community.

I have spent most of my life in the church, and the reality is that it's not always peaceful and joyful in the body of Christ. It's not always an encouraging community full of forgiveness and compassion and mercy, and unconditional love. We don't consistently express grateful appreciation for one another. I think we have a hard time because we are called to extend these graces to people who are not easy to get along with, the difficult people. The people who need our mercy, grace, forgiveness, and compassion are the critical, hurting, negative, irritating, unappreciative, disloyal people! It is a tough assignment to live out the love of Christ for difficult people.

In my years in the church, I have noticed there are not enough people who encourage us. We need people who offer us confidence and hope to persevere in Christian living. Actually, I think many people have a way of discouraging rather than affirming us. In *Fully Human, Fully Alive* John Powell relates a story his friend told him about vacationing in the Bahamas which illustrates this point:

A large and restless crowd gathered on a pier. Upon investigation he discovered that the object of all the attention was a young man making the last minute preparation for a solo journey around the world in a home made boat. Without exception, everyone on the pier was vocally pessimistic. All were actively volunteering to tell the ambitious sailor all the things that could possibly go wrong. "The sun will broil you!" "You won't have enough food!" "That boat of yours won't withstand the waves in a storm!" "You'll never make it!" But my friend heard all of these discouraging warnings to the adventurous young man. He felt an irresistible desire to offer some optimism and encouragement. As the little craft began drifting away from the pier towards the horizon, my friend went to the end of the pier, waving both arms wildly, like semaphores spelling confidence he kept shouting, "Bon voyage! You're really something! We're with you! We're proud of you! Good luck brother!" (1)

I wish that friend's response was normative for us in the body of Christ, but I think we are too often more like the “nay-sayers” on the pier. Focused on the negative, we can be critical, irritating, pessimistic, and faithless. Now, in light of the apostle Paul's relationship with the Corinthian Christians, Paul would resonate with John Powell's story. The Christians in Corinth were unappreciative of Paul's ministry among them and they proved to be unloving and disloyal as well. It is discouraging when people you care about do not reciprocate. As we have seen in our studies of chapters 10-12 of 2 Corinthians (see Discovery Papers #4650-#4654), the issue had to do with the superficiality and immaturity in the faith of the Christians. They were evaluating ministry by worldly criteria. Remember that they had been attracted to seemingly impressive “super apostles” who distorted the gospel and claimed the right to financial support. Like most of us, these Corinthians seemed more impressed by something they had to pay for than by ministry that was freely offered in love as by their spiritual father Paul.

Paul models the marks of a true Christian leader. He cared deeply about the Corinthians' spiritual well-being and refused to burden them financially to demonstrate that there was no price tag on the gospel. His commitment to follow Christ in leadership had led to deep suffering, floggings, hunger and thirst, and danger after danger. Additionally, he agonized with people who were weak in their faith or who had sin issues in their lives. Paul identified with the people to whom he ministered and cared enough for them to accept personal hardship in order to help them. Sadly enough, most of the Christians did not defend Paul when the false teachers in Corinth verbally attacked him. They either said nothing or they agreed with the accusations made against him.

In chapter 12, verses 11-18, we see the challenge Paul is making to Corinth. Look carefully at how Paul relates to the critical, negative, irritating and pessimistic Christians there. As we examine his relationships and response, I hope we will learn something about relating to difficult people in our own lives.

Corinthian lack of appreciation

In verses 11-13, Paul demonstrates amazing humility in spite of a lack of appreciation or “commendation” as he says:

I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you [here is the lack of appreciation on their part], for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

No image to protect

The first thing we observe in the opening verse is that Paul has no image to protect with these people. At the end of verse 11 when he says of himself that he is “a nobody,” he really does mean it. This is not false humility. While Paul is in no way inferior to the “super apostles,” he always attributes his own effectiveness in ministry entirely to the grace of God. In 1 Corinthians 15:9-10 he writes:

For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

This is a great paradox of Christian living: in ourselves we are nothing, but because of God's power at work in us, we are not inferior to anybody. That reality is the source of Paul's humility so that he can overlook wrong treatment without being angry or resentful. Our wounded pride often makes us feel angry or resentful or retaliatory in responding to people. As we saw last week, Paul's thorn in the flesh replaced pride with humility so that he could keep on loving people who mistreated him and took advantage of him.

Confident in his apostolic ministry among them

The second point in terms of Paul's humility is shown in verse 12. He is very confident of his apostolic ministry among them. God sent him to Corinth and he was God's man doing exactly what God had called him to do: "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles." Here Paul is gently reminding his spiritual sons and daughters of certain characteristics of his ministry. They proved that he was a genuine apostle of Jesus Christ, worthy of being "commended" by them.

Mark writes of the original apostles whom Jesus had commissioned to minister on his behalf: "And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed" (Mark 16:20). Paul is now listing three aspects of the miraculous activity that marked his time in Corinth: signs and miracles that validated his preaching and teaching ministry, wonders that evoked reverence and fear of God, and mighty deeds that pointed to God's greatness, power, and majesty. It is significant that Paul chooses to use the passive voice in the beginning of verse 12. Rather than writing, "I performed the signs of a true apostle," he says, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you." Paul disowns any credit for the supernatural signs accompanying his ministry. They were God's doing, not his.

In both 1 and 2 Corinthians, we see that the church there places tremendous emphasis on the miraculous; however Paul himself does not. He is patiently secure in his relationship to God and to the church in Corinth. Paul is also persevering. He has a humble confidence even when faced with a lack of appreciation, for he knows God is in control. He does not have to fight back.

Stands firm in his decision

Verse 13 is fascinating to me. Usually when people are upset with me or frustrated or resentful, my emotional response is to vacillate or try to figure out how to calm them down and make them happy. Paul doesn't do that. He stands by his decision to not accept financial support from them:

For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

Using gentle irony, Paul observes that the only mark of apostleship missing in Corinth is his acceptance of any kind of financial support from the church. He supported himself as a tent maker while he lived there for a year and a half. In contrast, the “super apostles” (or “big shots” as Eugene Peterson calls them in his paraphrase, *The Message*) are demanding and expecting generous support for what they are doing. They want to be compensated and say they have a right to that. Paul’s consistent rejection of support must have been a large issue with the Corinthian Christians as he mentions it several times in both chapters 11 and 12 as well as in chapter 9 of 1 Corinthians. In all of these references to the support issue, it is clear that the Corinthians felt as if Paul was doing them personal injury by not taking support from them. Paul, however, stands firm in the decision that he made.

Corinthians lack of loyalty

In the next section, verses 14-18, the issue is a of lack of loyalty. In spite of the Corinthians’ lack of loving response to him, Paul is amazingly unselfish with these people:

Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. And I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less? [He is referring to the issue of the lack of loyalty.] But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?

Paul refuses to keep score

In spite of the Corinthians lack of loyalty, Paul refuses to keep score. In verse 14, he is coming for a third visit and still will not take any salary from them. People mattered more to Paul than material things. The Corinthians were acting like immature children in that they thought they were grown up. They wanted to be his patrons, paying him well and providing a nice place for him to live. They wanted him to be dependent on them so they could exercise a degree of control over his life and ministry. But Paul turns the tables and says, “I am your spiritual father. You are my dependents. I want to be your spiritual support.” Paul’s affections were set on the Corinthians themselves rather than on what they owned or what they could give him materially.

In reviewing both Corinthian letters, Paul’s unselfishness is seen in three consistent themes of what he wanted for these people. I think these are what any spiritual parent would want for their children. Paul cared greatly about their commitment

and devotion to Christ, their maturity—quitting childish behavior and growing into full maturity—and he did crave their reciprocal love; he wanted them to love him back.

His concern about their relationship to Jesus as Lord in their lives is addressed in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3, “For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.”

Regarding their growing up and turning away from childish behavior, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?” Signs of immaturity in a church or in relationships are conflict, competition, and jealousy. Paul loved them like a spiritual father and he wanted his children to grow up.

Finally, in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, he writes about reciprocal love, “Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also.”

I was thinking this week about Candy’s and my relationship with our four children, and any parent’s responsibility to provide for their children. When they were little, we felt fully responsible to meet all of their needs—physically, materially, emotionally, relationally, and even spiritually. Now that they are young adults, there is greater mutuality in our relationships. Our children are starting to contribute spiritually, emotionally, relationally, even materially, helping to pay their way through college. As a spiritual father, I still care about their maturity and commitment to Jesus, and that life works for them, even financially. It is hard to get away from being a father once you are a father and this element is partly at work in the apostle Paul.

A Christ-like servant heart toward them

In verse 15, in spite of this lack of loyalty, we see Paul loves them. He is a servant who has this amazing heart like Jesus toward them.

And I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?

In light of the one-sided relationship, this is amazing grace on Paul’s part. He is being a real servant of Jesus Christ in the face of unrequited love and in response to negative, critical, irritating, disloyal people. Paul is willing and able to model the life of Christ to them. Remember Jesus did not come to be ministered to but to minister, not to be served but to serve, not to take but to give.

This week I was studying chapter 10 of Mark's gospel with our Summer Leadership Institute interns, a group of our teenagers who love Jesus and care about ministry. We read these words of the Lord Jesus talking to his disciples in Mark 10:43-45:

...whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

That is radical love. Paul exhibited it toward the people in Corinth. He was not just a servant but a slave to these people, giving up his rights, willing to live sacrificially because that is what the cross is all about. Sacrificially living for people who did not love him back, Paul was willing to lovingly expend himself for the church in Corinth. It was not financial; it was himself—his time, his energy, his affection, his reputation and if need be, his health. The word “gladly” in verse 15 suggests that Paul took great pleasure in expending himself on their behalf. He did it joyfully, not grudgingly. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul said, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us” (NIV). And what Paul asked in return is the kind of response any parent would like from their children, loving gratitude.

The question at the end of verse 15 is very poignant: “If I love you the more am I to be loved the less?” You see his father's heart is really saddened by this lack of loyalty from his spiritual children. I am grateful for Paul's honesty here. He is not stoic or indifferent or emotionally blocked, nor is he protecting himself from people that can hurt him. He opens himself to them and models a tenderhearted, sensitive love.

Refuses to take unfair advantage

What was standing in the way of a mutual loving exchange between the Corinthians and Paul? Part of the answer comes in the last three verses (16-18a). Paul is insistent in his refusal to take unfair advantage of them:

But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he?

It would appear that it's the “rumor mill” at work in Corinth that is partly to blame for their suspicion and mistrust of Paul. Look at Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this section:

And why is it that I keep coming across these whiffs of gossip about how my self-support was a front behind which I worked an elaborate scam? Where's the evidence? Did I cheat or trick you through anyone I sent? I asked Titus to visit, and sent some brothers along. Did they swindle you out of anything?

The false apostles have tried to compromise Paul's integrity and reputation by suggesting that his refusal to accept direct support in Corinth was a fraud to lull the Corinthian Christians into complacency. They were insinuating that the collection

Paul was organizing for the poor Christians in Jerusalem was actually a deceptive way to collect money for himself. They accused Paul of tricking the people. The word at the end of verse 16, either “deceit” or “trickery” (NASB and NIV, respectively) means the bait that a fisherman uses to catch fish. In this case, the bait was the heart-wrenching story of the Judean believers’ desperate need for the Corinthians’ help. The false apostles were saying, “Paul hooked you, and you swallowed it hook, line and sinker!”

The Corinthians must have really wanted to think the worst of Paul, if they gave credence to that kind of gossip. They chose to ignore the facts regarding the precautions Paul had taken in this whole mission project. In 1 Corinthians 16 he had insisted that the collection for Judea be completed before he even arrived in Corinth so that he would have no personal involvement in it. He asked that representatives from the Corinth church be appointed to go with the money and personally deliver it to Jerusalem. In 2 Corinthians 7 and 8, as well as in 12:18, he reminds them about Titus, a man whom they loved and completely trusted who had ministered to them. Paul says, “I trust him! You loved and trusted him! Did he ever rip you off?” That is really the question asked. Paul is challenging them to provide any specific evidence of exploitation from him or any of his representatives.

Paul models what he expects of others

In the final question in verse 18, Paul models what he expects or would love to have from his brothers and sisters in Corinth:

Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?

Paul asserts that he has always refused to take unfair advantage of them and he won’t when he returns for this third visit. The fact that his conscience is clear is one of the reasons he is looking forward to returning and being with them. There was never a time when he took advantage of their relationship for some personal benefit. Paul’s love is genuine. What they have seen of him is the real Paul; there is no hidden agenda at work at all.

Summarizing Paul’s responses to these brothers and sisters, he is amazingly humble, in spite of their lack of appreciation. He has no wounded pride or image to protect. Confident in who he is, God’s person in ministry, Paul knows that God is in control. He stands by his decision to not take support. He is consistent, not vacillating because of an emotional reaction to his stand. In spite of the lack of love and loyalty from the Corinthians, Paul is amazingly unselfish, refusing to keep score in terms of how they treat him and responding with an amazing heart of love. He is willing to spend and be expended for them. Having never taken advantage of them, Paul has a totally clear conscience before them and the Lord. And finally, Paul models what he expects from other people; he walks his talk.

Paul shows us how to relate to negative, critical, irritating, and pessimistic people. When you are mistreated or offended, first ask God to help you remember Paul’s model of humility and unselfishness. Second, be pro-active in the face of discouraging people and ask yourself a few questions:

Is my image too important to me? Do I care too much about what people think of me? Is there pride which needs to be brought to the foot of the cross, repented of, and surrendered to Jesus?

Am I falling into the trap of keeping score? Is my friendship or generosity conditioned by how others in the body treat me? Am I more reactive than proactive?

Do I have a servant heart like the apostle and Jesus or do I pay more attention to how people spend and expend for me? Am I willing to live sacrificially for people who wrong me and take advantage of me?

Am I taking advantage of the other person? Do I have an attitude of, "You owe me after what you have put me through"?

Do I model what I expect from the people who have wronged me? Do I live as an encourager in the face of discouragement?

After you have wrestled with these kinds of questions in response to offense and mistreatment, ask God to help you change, to be expended for the souls of the very people who have wronged you. Instead of reacting to them as the enemy, try to see them as God does. Stop and think: "This person must be really hurting. I refuse to turn against them. Lord, how can I express your love?" If you are honest in a prayer like that, humility will emerge and reconciliation in relationship can begin.

Instead of resenting everybody in the church because of the few people who have offended you, stay involved. The temptation will be to withdraw and lick your wounds and to include everybody in the situation. When you choose to be gracious rather than irritated, unselfishness can develop. Speaking from my own experience with difficult people, if you choose to respond in grace and kindness, oftentimes that will strip away the negative mask of criticism and disloyalty. You will find there is a different person inside, a person loved by Christ.

Instead of becoming offended and resentful and giving into the temptation to fight fire with fire or reject and criticize back, ask God to create a new heart in you, a heart of reconciliation. Look for ways of reaching out and encouraging that person. This means you are going to have to be available; you can not be distant and aloof. Ask God to open your schedule as well as your heart. Bridges aren't built with just a smile or a hug and a handshake after the church service on the way out to your car although that is how it may start for you. That may be the big first step you have to take. Loving the difficult person takes time and effort and availability.

I am tremendously optimistic that we can become more of a place of encouragement because I know who our God is. We can become a place where short accounts are kept, truth is lovingly told, and wrongs are made right. Paul was amazingly optimistic about these Corinthian Christians. He never gave up hope that they would become the people God wanted them to be. They could live in a peaceful, joyful community. I have the same conviction about our church, because we have the same Jesus as Lord as Corinth did. God is committed to making us servant-hearted people. Paul's optimistic words in Philippians 1:6 speak to us today, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

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NOTES:

1. John Powell, *Fully Human, Fully Alive*. Copyright © 1976, Argus Communications, Niles, IL. Pp. 17-18.

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2 Corinthians 12:11-18

26th Message

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