

As you may know, I'm a fan of a Christian satire site called "The Babylon Bee." Satire can be defined as: the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and critique foolishness or vices, in the context of contemporary topical issues. Satire often hits very close to home - sometimes in funny ways, and other times in ways that makes one cringe.

The news entry for October 29, 2020 had this headline: *US Breaking Report: Lots of Yelling at Each Other Expected to Fix Things Any Day Now.* The article goes on to say this -

It is a contentious time in this country, with a sharp partisan divide, but a number of people have stumbled upon what they think could be the answer: *lots of yelling at each other.*

"Loud yelling really is the answer," said concerned citizen Clayton Pearson , *"and it's not just the volume of the yelling but also the content. It should be full of anger. And the target is anyone on the opposite side of me, politically. If I express that I'm even angrier now at people I already didn't like, that will finally engender change."*

According to online activist Larry Garrett, another effective tactic involves virtual yelling online. *"If I type enough angry things online [in all caps] to show how frustrated I am - especially with people who don't share my politics - that's going to finally turn this country around."*

It has been pointed out that many of these people are already yelling, so it's not certain how this "new" effort is going to lead to a different outcome. *"Yes - but now we're yelling even louder,"* activist Vicki Craig explained, *"and we are even angrier."* It's uncertain if they've finally reached the volume and anger level needed to fix things, but both of those measures are expected to increase in the coming week, hopefully reaching the correct level before Election Day.

This one of those entries where you are more likely to cry than laugh - but it sounds familiar.

For the past five weeks, and for the next few weeks we're sharing a sermon series called *"Christian Character for Challenging Times."* Some of that is related to issues associated with the Pandemic, but other parts are connected to the divisive political climate in our nation, and those things are on top of the other challenging things we face in the normal course of life. I spoke at length about political issues in our Wesley Night Bible study this past week - so, if you care to, you can watch that video on our website or YouTube page. Today I want to focus more generally about how to deal with contentious and difficult people, because, if you are anything like me, you getting quite a bit of opportunity to do that these days.

Let me say again, as I have in other sermons, that I'm not sure how or whether, the things I'm recommending today will change the world, or fix what's wrong in our nation or relationships. Sometimes we just need to learn what faithfulness to God looks like, and strive to live that way (as God enables us), and then leave the outcomes to God. We must choose Christian Character for it's own sake, in obedience to God, and then trust God for the rest. We may not solve all the worlds' problems - but at least we won't actively contribute to them.

In Romans chapter 12, the apostle Paul discusses how we, as Christians, should act toward our antagonists – toward those difficult people that come into our lives. Every society, every family, even every church has difficult people in them (and sometimes we are those people).

I know a pastor who calls difficult folks in his church “EGR people” which means, “Extra Grace Required.” I like that. In the midst of the challenging and divisive times that we’re facing, I believe this is what is needed - Extra Grace Required.

I don’t know why the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to take up this topic. Was something going on in the church in Rome that led Paul to focus on the issue of strained relationships? Was he reflecting on his personal experience with his many enemies? Was Paul remembering his time as an antagonist of the church and how Stephen prayed for those who were stoning him?

Maybe Paul had talked to people who said they would trust Christ but they had met too many meanspirited Christians. I’ve heard that many times. Maybe they told Paul they felt beaten up by believers when they were hurting or lost or wrong instead of feeling loved by them.

Frankly, I don’t know, but I know that we need this teaching now as much as ever. In the today’s text Paul seems to be dealing mostly with conflicts between people outside the church (though the principles certainly apply to those who are fellow believers).

In Romans Paul echos the words of Jesus which we considered last week. We used the version from Matthew, but today I will read the Luke version. Remember how Jesus said, “Do for others as you would like them to do for you. "Do you think you deserve credit merely for loving those who love you? Even the sinners do that! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, is that so wonderful? Even sinners do that much! "Love your enemies! Do good to them! Lend to them! Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to the unthankful and to those who are wicked. (Lk 6:31-35)

Let’s walk through our text from Romans. The first way to respond to difficult people is:

1. TRY TO BLESS THEM. Romans 12:14 says, “*Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.*” Jesus tells us the same thing: “*Bless those who curse you, [and] pray for those who mistreat you.*” (Lk 6:28)

To be a blessing in this context, means to do or say something good or helpful for them - in response to them doing the opposite for you. This blessing in the Bible is twofold:

WE PRAY FOR THEM AND ASK GOD’S BLESSING UPON THEM. If you have difficult people in your life you should be praying for them.... not praying that the Lord takes them home (that is a nice way of saying you pray for them to drop dead) - no - you pray for God to bless them, to help them, to bring them to repentance and then to faith and on to joy.

The harder time you have with someone, the more you should be praying for them. It will help you gain the Lord's perspective on that person and situation, and they surely need God's help.

Next - WE SEEK TO BE A BLESSING TO THEM – by doing what we can to meet their needs, by helping them, by serving them, and even by thinking of their needs above our own.

This seems to go against our instincts, and against the way of most people around us, and certainly against the wisdom of the world. When we are treated poorly by others, in big and small ways - when we're innocent - the first thing we want to do is to curse and retaliate - but the Word of God says we should do the opposite. It demands that we bless our antagonists.

Jesus, Himself, supplies the perfect example. On the cross, and in His sufferings that led to the cross, He never retaliated. He never cursed or threatened. He didn't return hate for hate. He didn't try to hurt those who were hurting him. What did He do instead? He prayed for God the Father to forgive them. He sacrificed Himself for them. He offered them grace.

Just think of it: Jesus had all the power to wipe out His persecutors, to annihilate them from the face of the earth. Often, we may not have the power or ability to retaliate, even if we wanted to. Christ had all the power to fight back - yet He chose to use it in another way.

I think it's wrong to assume this was easy for Jesus. The Bible says that in His human nature He was tempted in all points just like as we are - and I know what I would have been tempted to do. But He restrained and controlled His human nature in order to do God's will. He did fight back, but He fought that evil with more sacrificial love and with extra grace.

And what was the result? The centurion in charge of His crucifixion and the soldiers with him were moved to say: *"Truly this man was the Son of God."* (Mat 27:54)

Not many days later, thousands of people (many of whom may have watched His death) accepted Jesus Christ as their savior and Lord and the church was born there in Jerusalem. I am not sure if that would have happened if Jesus had just been another condemned criminal fighting with, and cursing at, those who were executing him. Or if Jesus had just been another conquering King killing his enemies to expand His rule. The world had seen that many times.

The way of the fallen world is to use power to punish and coerce and to force others to do our bidding. It doesn't bring lasting change. Jesus and His followers through history have proven that forgiveness and grace have a greater power to change people from the inside out.

2. WE ARE CALLED TO OFFER A WELCOMING GRACE.

The church is not meant to be an exclusive club for people who've got their act together. The family of God is not only for those who are easy to get along with, or who are lovable, or who are right, or who are deeply spiritual. No - it is for everyone. It's for sinners just like us.

Occasionally I'll run into someone who says, "I think churches are full of sinners and hypocrites!" I reply, *"I know, isn't it great?! That means there is a place for us! Let's go!"*

As Christians we're called to have a welcoming and gracious spirit. That means we should try to make room for all sorts of people in our lives and in our circle of care. We should try to do all we can to help all people come into a saving relationship with God through Christ.

Some people use the word "inclusive" instead of "welcoming." However, in some cases, that actually means to have a **relativistic world view** - that is, one that denies the existence of absolutes, of right and wrong, or God-given boundaries for our beliefs and behaviors. For them, "love" must equal affirmation of whatever another person believes or does. I reject that world-view. As long as you believe the Bible is the Word of God, then you will see that people do and believe many things that are contrary to God's will for their lives. We're not helping people by ignoring or condoning sin in their lives. Christian love is always balanced with truth. We welcome everyone, but we must be honest about what God says about sin. Why? Because true love wants to help people get back on the right track with God - that is - to turn away from sin before that sin hurts them and others any worse than it already has.

This is what a welcoming world view means to me - it means that we can never be fully content until everyone has been invited to find his or her place at the banquet table of the Lord. All people, no matter what they've done, can come to that place by the way of repentance, and by grace through faith in Christ. Christians are called to look at difficult people and see people who need the Lord. We are supposed to be people who offer love to even the most unlovely of people - people the world might reject - because we want to help lead them to Christ.

One of my favorite short poems, is "Outwitted," and it was written by Edwin Markham, after whom my Junior High School was named. He wrote

*He drew a circle that shut me out - Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in.*

While others are focused on excluding people - we should focus on including them. As I will say later, people may not appreciate or accept our offers of grace, but we keep offering.

Blessed is the person who can say, with Will Rogers, "I never met a man I didn't like." That means we need to work at finding something to love, something to connect with, something to value in every person we meet - no matter how difficult they are to love. And then, we just keep on sharing the truth in love with them, with kindness as much as possible.

3. WE MUST PRACTICE FORGIVENESS.

Romans 12:17 says, *“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable.”* Again this goes against our human instincts.

I read a funny story this week about a little 8-year-old boy named Jack. Jack’s mother ran into the bedroom when she heard his scream and found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. She gently released the little girl’s grip and sympathetically said to Jack, *“There, there. She didn’t mean it. She doesn’t know how much that hurts.”*

Mom was barely out of the room when the little girl screamed. Rushing back in, she said, *“What happened?”* Little Jack explained: *“She knows now!”*

Isn’t that how we want to respond when we are hurt? We want to make sure the other person knows how we feel by hurting them right back.

Last week Drew talked about the old way, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” It comes naturally to strike back, to return harm for harm. Jesus helped us to see how that approach to life will eventually leave everyone blind and toothless. Forgiveness is our hope. Grace - undeserved love - is the only chance to break a cycle of harm, and retribution, and vengeance. Grace, even God’s grace - doesn’t always bring reconciliation, or peace, because some people choose to reject it, whether from us or from God. Still, only grace has the power to redeem, and to change a human life from the inside out, so grace is what we must offer.

Verse 18 seems to be somewhat of an amendment of verse 17: *“If possible - so far as it depends on you - live at peace with all people.”* (Romans 12:18)

It is not always possible to avoid conflict. Even the Prince of Peace found Himself in situations of conflict, but He was never the author of the conflict. He never stoked the fires of conflict, or sought to punish or blame or condemn others - even when they persisted in sin. The conflicts he had with others were only sustained by their resistance to the grace and truth He offered, but even so, He continued to offer grace and a path back into the will of God. As I’ve said, not everyone accepted His grace, which requires repentance and faith, but that didn’t change His character, which was to work for peace and reconciliation between people and God.

Basically, what Paul is saying is that the attempt to make peace is always our responsibility. As much as possible we must seek to live at peace with all people. In some cases that means we let them go - and move on from them until they are willing to accept the grace of God - and the grace we offer. Jesus walked away from many people, who weren’t willing or able to trust in Him at that point, but He never withdrew His love or His offer of grace to them.

Whether or not others obey God is between them and God. Whether or not WE obey God is our first priority. We can’t control what other people do - but we can choose to be faithful to God’s Word, as we speak the truth in love, and seek peace, and try and be reconciled to others.

We must also remember that even though other people will disappoint us, God won't.

People will often betray or hurt us or reject us - but God never will. He proved it at the Cross and if you give Him a chance He will prove it in your life. By contrast, if we anchor our joy to the behavior of others, we will ride a roller coaster all our life. People are inconsistent and often unforgiving or unrepentant. As a result a healthy relationship with them is not always possible - because they won't do their part. That can be heartbreaking IF we don't have something deeper to hold on to. That something deeper is a relationship with Christ that remains sweet even if the entire world turns against us - and with that as our foundation we can do all we can, in the hopes of having better and more peaceful relationships with others.

4. We are to respond to difficult people with OVERWHELMING KINDNESS. Listen to verse 20 again, but *“if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.”*

What is Paul talking about? Heaping burning coals on a person's head doesn't seem too kind. This has been interpreted in a few different ways. Many believe it refers back to biblical times and how one would help a person when the fire in their stove or fireplace was about to go out. They didn't have matches or a lighters like we do - so sometimes they would go to a neighbor and ask for burning coals to get their fire started again. If you were kind and generous you would heap the coals up high for them to make sure they had all they needed.

Many bible scholars believe Paul is also talking about the way you can make people burn with shame when you repay evil with kindness. When you return kindness and blessing to those who hurt you, your acts of kindness have the potential of awakening a sense of guilt. Guilt is supposed to motivate people to change - to stop doing the thing that made them feel guilty. This expresses the idea that responding to people with love and kindness may drive them to humility and repentance which in turn can lead them to forgiveness and healing.

In any case, it just reinforces the idea that we are to overcome evil with good.

5. The fifth thing is the most obvious - I've already said it a few times in this series - but it is worth repeating lest we forget it. **We should love other people in the same way that God loves us in Christ** - that is - with undeserved grace.

God hates sin - because God knows the harm it causes - but God loves sinners. To deal with difficult people we must respond to them the same way God responds to us - even though we're often difficult and even rebellious people. **Like God we offer undeserved grace.**

I don't think Paul ever forgot that at one time he was zealous for all the wrong reasons and did terrible things including persecuting Christians and even seeking to put them to death. Sometimes well meaning people do hurtful things and don't realize at the time that what they're doing is wrong. Or maybe they are too broken or misguided to know any better.

Once again, please remember, that now and then we are one of “those people.” In those times remember this: God loves us still! We must act with grace, even when others don't act that way toward us, because that is how God has acted toward us.

Ephesians 4:32 says, *“Be kind, one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.”*

Let me recap the five points I see in our text about responding to difficult people:

- 1. Try to Bless Them** (*pray for God’s blessing on them, and be a blessing yourself*)
- 2. Offer Welcoming Grace** (*work harder at including all people in your circle of love and concern, but also continue to speak the truth in love as you have opportunity*)
- 3. Practice Forgiveness** (*and whenever possible try to live in peace with all people*)
- 4. Respond with overwhelming kindness to everyone**
- 5. Love others in the same way God has loved you in Christ** (*with undeserved grace*)