

## LESSON 4

# Dealing With Difficult People in the Church

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*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

— Romans 12:18

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## Introduction

Do you know people you just don't like to be around because of their bad attitudes, bad habits, and bad behaviors? The ones that make you cringe when you hear their voice. The ones that cause you to secretly smile when you hear they're moving. Do you know people like that in the *church*? Be honest. In any group of people, there is always at least one individual like that (if you really can't think of any in your circle, maybe it's *you*...).

We all have those we favor... and those we don't. We may love them altruistically, honestly pray for them, and even show them charity and kindness, but being left on a deserted island with them would just be torture. How sad. We know it's not right, but feelings are feelings. God has left us to deal with these souls, created in His image, for whom Christ also died. We may try to view them for a few good qualities or their future potential, but we're forced to engage with them *now*, in the *present*... and love them.

## Abigail and Nabal

Consider the story of Abigail, found in I Samuel 24 and 25. She was a wise and Godly woman. But she was married to a wealthy, yet morose and selfish man named Nabal (his Hebrew name literally meant "fool"). He was generally hated by his household and servants for his greed and evil temper. Although David's men protected Nabal's wandering sheep and even cared for his shepherds using David's own resources, Nabal refused to repay David and even to offer food and refreshment to David's men when they were in need.

Despite her wealth and position, Abigail exercised discernment to prevent the situation from escalating into bloodshed (involving Nabal and his household). She humbled herself and pleaded with an angry David to spare Nabal, bringing gifts and even offering to accept the blame for the 'misunderstanding'. She remained faithful and respectful, yet Nabal cared nothing about the situation or his carelessness.

The next day, when Abigail revealed to her husband that she had saved his life and those of his family, scripture says his "heart turned to stone" (possibly a stroke or heart attack), and he died a few days later. Fortunately, the Lord showed her mercy through David, and she became David's wife. Imagine for a minute, however, what it would be like to be married to a man like Nabal! Despite her daily suffering and

disrespect, Abigail even put her life on the line for this ungrateful wretch. And that was without any hope that her situation would ever improve. She remained a Godly example, showing others how to deal with an extremely “difficult person”!

God made us all very different. There is a tremendous variety of physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual qualities that separate us. As such, we have different abilities, face different crises and challenges, see our environment differently, and have equipped ourselves with varying degrees of God’s resources.

That being said, some of us are healthy and some not; some are energetic, and some chronically tired; some are willing and some are obstinate; some are arrogant and some are humble; some spread righteousness but others harbor sin; some are joyful but some are depressed; some are nitpickers and some easy-going; some are exciting and some boring; some are engaged, and some are remain detached; some are outgoing, and many are introverts; some are risk-takers and some remain timid; some are calm, and some are anxious; some are kind, and some like to be snarky; some are people persons, and some are hermits. Most importantly, some are tireless workers for the Lord, while some just seem to be too tired or distracted to ever do the Lord’s work.

Perhaps the best way to assess the challenge of successfully building a relationship with difficult people is to carefully and accurately examine their nature and circumstances to see “what makes them tick.” Let’s try to define the problem.

## **Every Congregation Has 5 Basic Types of Members**

**The wayward** – these folks are always controversial due to their continual involvement, or at least flirtation, with sin; despite their talents, they have limited their effectiveness for service due to their compromised behavior and poor spiritual examples; they are often afraid to get involved and draw attention to themselves

**The wavering** – these members live on the margins; spiritually, they’re disengaged and lurk on the sidelines in the life of the congregation; rarely ever around, they nonetheless insist on being part of the ‘official roster’ and are frequently asking for help from the congregation (such as financial, spiritual, and social)

**The weak** – these good folks aren’t disengaged, but they’re frozen in their growth and ineffective in their efforts; they may be weak from personal tragedies (from which they never seem to recover, even with God’s help), or weak by personal choice (intentional milk drinkers and not meat eaters); either way, it’s hard to count on them for effective help in the Lord’s work

**The worried** – they are good people, and will usually help with the work when asked; always anxious and fearful of any change; often quick to criticize but slow to help find solutions; they often lack much spiritual vision and are too busy fretting over their own personal problems and spiritual situations to be much of a part of congregational growth

**The willing workers**, statistically only about 20 % of most congregations; these are the ones who let their spiritual lights shine and are always busy serving – they don’t let personal problems weigh them

down and look for ways to help with the work, even without being asked. They are truly dedicated to serving others and are filled with joy, knowing their source of strength is God and not themselves

This is the pool of Christians with which we must associate and work with and share fellowship in the congregation. It's your family, and as you know, you can't really choose your family. How did we allow ourselves to get this way?

Bad attitudes and their reflections in our personalities generally begin with personal pain. It may be physical pain or psychological pain, brought on by the experiences and trauma of life. Unless we continually give our pain to God and accept His healing, it eats away at the soul and leaves an empty hole where once love and happiness existed. We struggle to maintain control, but the door is open for Satan to flood us with panic and wrong thinking, leading to bad behavior and all sorts of ugliness when we interact with others.

Before we begin, let these scriptures act as the salt to season our thoughts and words:

*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

– Colossians 3:13

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ God forgave you.*

– Ephesians 4:32

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.*

– Philippians 2:3-4

*How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.*

– Psalm 133:1

## **A Partial List of What We Might Call the Rotten Fruits of the Spirit**

- ***"I have to win"*** - can't handle losing or being wrong; this will drive others away and eventually cause them to rally against you.
- ***"I have to be seen"*** - always being in the spotlight means others are stuck in the shadows; eventually, the audience will go home.
- ***"I have to be consulted"*** - they sulk if they don't get their say; it will make others miserable, and you don't always have to share your opinion.
- ***"I have to be hurt"*** – it seems nobody has ever suffered as much as they have; well...nobody likes a false martyr.
- ***"I have to argue"*** – every decision, however small, has to be debated; some people just love to create controversy.

- ***“I have to be in control”*** - some people insist on wielding power over others or feel a need to micromanage everything they touch; you make others feel manipulated and relegated to unimportance.
- ***“I have to whine”*** – unpleasant to be around, they suck the energy out of every situation and person; they may even be willing to work, but they must make everyone else miserable in the process.
- ***“I’ll have to find time later”*** – apathetic or indifferent to the work, whether from laziness, disapproval, or self-satisfaction; they never seem to be around when the work is passed out.

### ***What underlies these attitude problems??***

- **Past abuse** – psychological or physical.
- **Pride** – too much me, not enough Thee.
- **Selfishness** – we won’t let our world revolve around the *Son*.
- **Jealousy/ envy** – more men die of jealousy than cancer (Joseph P. Kennedy).
- **Unhappiness/ lack of joy** – enjoy life, as there’s plenty of time later to be dead.
- **Insecurity** – can’t you even trust God to help you?
- **Impatience** – does *everyone* have to revolve around your schedule?
- **Indifference** – not just apathy, but a lack of love for others

Obviously, there are a lot of things going on with many of these “higher maintenance” Christians. That means developing effective relationships will take a lot of time and patience. And even then, there’s no guarantee of success. So, how can we ever interact with problem people?

## **Learning to Work with Problem People**

### ***Prepare your own heart and mind to effectively associate with them.***

- **Whenever you meet, acknowledge the reality of your relationship and frequently refocus** - move your mind and thinking from their behavior to your responses; oh, and be polite!
- **Consider the “90-second pause”** – the latest internet trend, but based on neuroscience and may be helpful; if you get triggered, stop for 90 seconds and allow yourself to feel your emotions without acting on them, release the stress, and then move forward without revisiting the bad feeling
- **Allow them to remain who they are** – *don’t try to change them*, because you really can’t; if sin is involved, the best you can do is bring them to awareness and warn
- **Remain emotionally detached but observe their behavior and interactions** – remember, they can’t really hurt you, and they can’t even *affect* you unless you allow them
- **Steer the interaction to action-oriented topics and solutions** – stay in your lane and avoid emotional triggers and responses

- **Set clear boundaries for your discussions and interactions** – know when to back up or say no, and know when you're being triggered (remember they can't or won't restart their bad behavior if you don't give them a reason to do so)
- **Cultivate the relationship with your 'new friend'** – include them in group activities, and ask them to accompany you when you serve (activities such as teaching, visiting the sick, and helping shut-ins); complement them when they do a good job of serving, and acknowledge their effort
- **Don't ever give up** – Jesus never did

***If a confrontation or intervention is necessary:***

- **Make sure this is important enough that something really needs to be said** – don't just react to your impatience or intolerance
- **Don't wait for them to act** – *you go first* to initiate solving the problem of fixing the relationship; show you have enough love to build a bridge (they already know how you feel by your previous interactions); everyone likes to be pleasantly surprised
- **Again, allow them to remain who they are** – it's not your job (or even right) to force them to change
- **State your intentions** – use facts, not opinions; show love and be kind
- **State the goal of this discussion and suggested solution** - don't be in a hurry to 'solve their problem' and leave – they are important; building a new relationship takes lots of time and effort; regulate your pace so no one gets overwhelmed, and stay calm
- **Ask for their perspective of the problem** – you might be surprised at the response
- **Use active listening** - separate emotion from information, and don't close your ears and put up your defenses – they really can't hurt you, and you don't need to react to them with negativity; take an interest in their soul and find out what causes them to be the way they are; most people have a 'story' to tell and desperately want to tell it while someone listens – their relief in doing so can sometimes be surprising
- **Avoid accusations and using broad generalities** - Take a deep breath and pause to collect your thoughts and feelings; don't be in a hurry to 'solve their problem' and leave. Like you, they are important; building a new relationship takes lots of time and effort; regulate your pace so no one gets overwhelmed, and stay calm
- **Recognize the anxiety** – the personal/ internal anxiety you have, and the shared anxiety between you and them (people can sense even when you're mildly nervous); don't try to hide your negative feelings, but acknowledge them and promise to do better in the future; just take another deep breath



