



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## Ministering to Difficult People

Difficult people are part of life. And part of kingdom living is ministering to difficult people; it comes with the territory.

We could think of Jeremiah, who spent a large part of his ministry being persecuted by the ones he was called to serve. We could also think of Isaiah, who was told prior to his calling that God's people wouldn't listen to him.<sup>1</sup> And there is Abigail who was united in marriage to a difficult man.<sup>2</sup> And Paul, who spoke of many disciples who had done him harm, like Demas, Alexander the coppersmith, Hymenaeus, Philetus, and his fellow countrymen who ceaselessly persecuted him.

And then there is also Samuel. He had a difficult row he had to hoe. He was confronted by the elders of Israel and told that his services no longer were desired or needed in Israel.<sup>3</sup>

1 Samuel 8:5, "And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations."

This greatly offended Samuel.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Isaiah 6:9-10

<sup>2</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 25

<sup>3</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 8

1 Samuel 8:6, “But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD.”

It is not hard to imagine how difficult it must have been for Samuel when he came face to face with his replacement. In 1 Samuel 8 Samuel is painfully rejected. And now in 1 Samuel 9 we find that he is forced not only to meet the one whom the people wanted, but he also is to install him as king.

You can just imagine the hurtful words that were spoken in Samuel's hearing when the people first beheld Saul.

- Now that's what I call a king.
- Finally, someone we can follow.
- Now that he's come everything will be alright.

I don't think any of us would have blamed Samuel had he treated Saul rudely, if not coldly. Each of us has had to deal with difficult people in our lives as well.

- Ingrates.
- Slanderers.
- People who have taken advantage of us.
- Men and women in whom we have invested only to discover later that in their estimation we didn't do enough.

Resentment, anger, and bitterness all come to mind as natural responses to such people. And that's what makes Christ's words in Luke so difficult.

Luke 6:27, “But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you.”

Love our enemies? Do good to those who hate us?

You have no idea what they've done to me!

Personally it's on account of verses like this that I wish I could go back in time and watch how godly men and women in the Bible dealt with those who hated or opposed them.

- How did their love manifest itself?
- Was it heartfelt?
- How did they go about “doing good” to them?

This passage gives us such a privilege. We get to look at how Samuel fulfilled Christ's command to “love your enemies, do good to them which hate you” (Luke 6:27). For far from cursing his replacement or treating him poorly Samuel here lavished his love upon Saul in tangible ways. Accordingly we have before us a passage which gives us insight on how to Minister to Difficult People.

## **Honoring Difficult People**

Notice the first exhortation that arises from Samuel's actions here. Loving our enemies begins with honoring them. There are two ways in which we do this: Publicly and privately.

1 Samuel 9:22, “And Samuel took Saul and his servant, and brought them into the parlour [as at Shiloh<sup>4</sup> and later on in Jerusalem<sup>5</sup> and in our text the adjoining dinning hall], and made them sit in the chiefest place among them that were bidden, which were about thirty persons.”

To appreciate this gesture on the part of Samuel, consider the back drop of this passage. As a prophet and a priest Samuel rode a yearly circuit.

1 Samuel 7:16-17, “And he went from year to year in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, and judged Israel in all those places. And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; and there he built an altar unto the LORD.”

The significance of each of these cities is that they were high places which housed an altar upon which a yearly sacrifice was made. Recall, until the building of the temple in Jerusalem and the consolidation of all altars into the one which was on the temple mount, places of worship in Israel could be found throughout the land. Typically they were high places which formerly housed pagan temples, temples which had been taken over by Israel upon the conquest in the era of Joshua. Israel took these high places over and used them for the worship of Yahweh as an apologetic against foreign religion!<sup>6</sup>

For example, recall when the Ark of the Covenant was returned to Israel in 1 Samuel 6. The Ark was taken up to Kiriathjearim.<sup>7</sup> It was a city at the top of a mountain, or a high place. It was a location which formerly housed an altar to Baal, but now was a place for worshipping Yahweh.

As these “high places” constituted an important part of worship in Israel prior to the time when all worship was consolidated in Jerusalem, as a prophet AND a priest Samuel was careful to oversee the sacrifices and worship which were held in these places. And yet he was just one man... which meant he would only come to a particular high place once per year. Now you must see that Samuel's presence in one of these towns would have been of special import... it meant that a peace offering was going to be enjoyed as a community.

Accordingly, the entire region would have dropped everything to participate in this offering and subsequent meal. And thus the peace meal at which Samuel THE PROPHET ate; signifying that peace had been restored between God and the worshipper; would have been attended by the most important people in town.

Such was the meal of which we are reading about in our text. Following the sacrifice in this particular town, a banquet was scheduled to which thirty of the most important men in the region had been invited. And yet,

- Who would get the seat of honor?
- Who would get to sit next to Samuel the prophet/priest?
- Who therefore would be the envy of all present?

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<sup>4</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 1:18 in the Septuigint

<sup>5</sup> Compare Jeremiah 35:2-4 and Nehemiah 10:38

<sup>6</sup> In the end it would be these “high places” which would trip up many a good king in the Old Testament. Because high places were renown places of worship in the religion of Yahweh, it was easy to allow them to remain.

<sup>7</sup> Compare 1 Samuel 7:1

Notice the text! It would be Saul and his servant!

1 Samuel 9:22, “And Samuel took Saul and his servant, and brought them into the parlour, and made them sit in the chiefest place among them that were bidden, which were about thirty persons.”

This indeed was an incredible act on the part of Samuel. Far from treating Saul with contempt, he honored him! And he honored him in a very public way. Samuel gave deference to this man and seated him in a place of great importance!

What does it mean to, “Do good to those who hate you?”

From Samuel's example we conclude, that it involves giving them honor, placing them ahead of yourself, and seeking their best! And doing all this in a very public and tangible way.

Truly nothing speaks of Christ's love better than this!

John 15:13-14, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends. . . .”

I hope you see it: Ministering to Difficult People means striving for their best, seeking to honor the individual quite openly.

You say, “How do you do this when everything in your heart longs to do just the opposite?” I want to give you two answers from this text. For the first we have to go back to 1 Samuel 8 and the words which God told Samuel immediately following Samuel's offense:

1 Samuel 8:7, “And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: **for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.**”

The object and focus of difficult people in ministry, provided we ourselves are serving the Lord on His terms, is NOT you or me BUT GOD! Truly in our flesh we continue to be at war with Christ! Thus, when the Christian; yes, even the Christian, attacks the child of God who is serving the Lord the object and focus of the attack is NOT the Christian, but Christ!

Recall the words spoken to Paul when he was confronted by Christ on the road to Damascus.

Acts 9:4, “And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, **Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?**”

Recall what Peter and John said after being severely beaten by the Jews of their day:

Acts 4:27, “**For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus**, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together,”

So how is it that Samuel was able to honor Saul so greatly? He knew that if there was any offense, it was not directed at himself but God.

And so it is in our life as well.

John 15:20, “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. **If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you;** if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.”

Accordingly I conclude that when a difficult person lashes out at me, their focus is not me, but Christ. And if that is the case, far from being bitter, I can rejoice as did the early church when they were so treated.

But then secondly we have to consider the words spoken to Samuel in 1 Samuel 9 when the prophet gazed at Saul for the first time.

1 Samuel 9:17, “And when Samuel saw Saul, the LORD said unto him, Behold the man whom I spake to thee of! this same shall reign over my people.”

Samuel knew that behind Saul was the providence of God ordaining and moving all things unto His glorious will. Saul was the choice of God!

Accordingly Samuel knew that to oppose God's tool/vessel was to oppose the Lord!

We see this same principle throughout Scripture. When David was forced to deal with one who opposed him, notice his consolation:

2 Samuel 16:10, “And the king said, What have I to do with you, ye sons of Zeruiah? so let him curse, because the LORD hath said unto him, Curse David. Who shall then say, Wherefore hast thou done so?”

David could endure Shimei's curse because the king had, “entrusted his soul to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Peter 4:19)!

How about Joseph and the amazing grace which he showed his brothers who ruined his life?

Genesis 50:20, “**But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good,** to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”

Then there is Peter and John, they said, “For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done” (Acts 4:27-28).

From all of this I hope you see that behind the difficult people of life is God who has ordained the circumstances and contingencies of your life. Thus not to endeavor to honor them is to dishonor God.

And so how am I able publicly to honor a difficult person? To openly to work for their good?

I know that all abuse or opposition that I have received ultimately has had as its focus Jesus Christ. God in His providence has raised up such a one in my life for His glory and my good. Thus I may not understand the ins and outs of it all, but trusting God I can labor publicly to honor my enemy.

## Honoring in Private

And yet if you think about to publicly bless an enemy is not that hard, this is what constitutes the better part of diplomacy. When William Wallace had rebelled against England, Robert the Bruce's father proclaimed "we will embrace him in the north, but condemn him in the south."

One can feign honor and support in public, so the calling here is not that difficult. And yet from our text, we see that Ministering to Difficult People goes beyond public blessing it includes honoring them personally.

1 Samuel 9:23-24, "And Samuel said unto the cook, Bring the portion which I gave thee, of which I said unto thee, Set it by thee. And the cook took up the shoulder<sup>8</sup>, and that which was upon it, and set it before Saul. And Samuel said, Behold that which is left! set it before thee, and eat: for unto this time hath it been kept for thee since I said, I have invited the people. So Saul did eat with Samuel that day."

I hope you see that this brings "blessing your enemy" to new heights. Notice a couple of points.

First, the upper thigh of a sacrifice was the most coveted part of a sacrificial animal available to man.<sup>9</sup> Keil and Delitzsch wrote this:

"What was attached to the leg, therefore, can only have been such of the fat upon the flesh as was not intended for the altar... [and so it was] the leg, as the largest and best portion, [that] was to be a piece of honour for Saul."<sup>10</sup>

But then secondly consider that Samuel already had publicly honored Saul in seating the future monarch next to himself, this means that the prophet had done his part in blessing the future king. And yet Samuel didn't stop here. On top of everything else, he reserved the best portion of the meal for Saul, his own portion!

According to Exodus 29:27-28 and Leviticus 7:33 the upper thigh was reserved for the priest; and the priest officiating at this meal was Samuel!

Do you understand therefore what is going on here? For Saul to receive this cut from the sacrifice meant that Samuel gave Saul the cut reserved for himself! Samuel gave Saul His own meal!

You get the idea that Samuel genuinely is seeking Saul's good here for he is going above and beyond the call of duty here. Truly, the prophet is not giving feigned homage; he genuinely was seeking to honor the future king!

From this we behold a second element in ministering to difficult people: We must endeavor to honor them not just publicly, but also personally... privately... in our hearts! Loving our enemies, ministering to difficult people, involves far more than simply "doing" them good. It requires of us a personal commitment to nothing less.

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<sup>8</sup> This is a reference to the upper thigh cut or the "leg" along with the fat on it.

<sup>9</sup> Virtually all commentaries reference this fact.

<sup>10</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 2, 1 Samuel, Page 93 ISBN: 0913573884

This means that in our hearts we do not curse, slander, or destroy our enemy, but genuinely and honestly seek their good. Is this not what Christ Himself commanded and practiced?

Think of it. For three years Christ allowed the most cursed man who ever walked the face of the earth to accompany Him, Judas Iscariot. During this time Judas stole from Christ,<sup>11</sup> opposed the Lord to His face.

And do you know what Christ did?

He showered this man with the greatest blessings imaginable. For three years Judas got to sit at Christ's feet and listen to Him speak. Judas ate side by side with Him. Judas watched Christ minister to the poor, and pour His heart out as He loved His own. What would any of us give to have the privilege of sitting at Christ's feet as did Judas?

In light of this I hope you agree that Christ was well-qualified to exhort His disciples to “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27). He Himself did nothing less when He walked the earth!

Truly honoring a difficult person is not optional; it is that which must characterize our lives.

Yet once again you say, where does the strength come from which will enable me to do this?

It is not difficult to honor an enemy in public. But controlling my heart such that I genuinely love a difficult person is quite another matter.

How do we honor a difficult person in our heart?

It begins with what we saw in our last point, recognizing that it ultimately is God who is both the object of the enemy's venom, and the One who has ordained their wickedness. Yet Scripture gives us more encouragement. We must also rejoice in Christ.

Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.”

When we dealt with this verse years back we saw that “rejoicing” is more than simply saying, “Yippee!” “Rejoicing” in Scripture has as its primary focus the basis upon which a man stands before God.

On account of our sin, we rightly deserve the wrath of God- hell \*\*and yet\*\* on account of God's grace, Christ stood in our place on the cross and suffered for us the wages of our sin. Thus, in Christ, we stand before God forgiven, white as snow!

Now when we come to the realization that we are forgiven, that we stand before God not guilty of sin, the result is the deep-seated conviction we call joy! And thus to “rejoice in the Lord” is to derive as the ground of your boasting, confidence, and joy

- Christ.
- His acceptance of you.
- His approval.

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<sup>11</sup> Compare John 12:16

- Denounce the praises of man.
- Disdain their approval.
- And so stand in this life as unmoved by man!

This was the exhortation Paul gave to Euodia and Syntyche when they were embroiled in conflict.<sup>12</sup> “So what Euodia is speaking evil of you, Syntyche? So what Syntyche has opposed you, Euodia? You've got Christ; what are the praises of man?”

How is it that Samuel could so bless Saul?

He knew the acceptance of his God!

## Prayer

When you consider prayer in the context of ministering to difficult people, Scripture gives us two angles. First we must pray for our enemy.

Matthew 5:43-45, “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”

Truly there is something about prayer which is transforming when it comes to the child of God. It is difficult to long for the destruction of one's you've been praying for. Truly to pray for the well-being and, in some cases, the salvation of a critic is to invest yourself in a significant way in God's program for their life. And thus with prayer comes a genuine longing in our hearts for the good of our enemy.

And yet we note that Christ says here that we ought to pray for our enemy because we're Christians, “in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”

The implication here is that though in our sinful flesh we might long for the destruction of our enemy, through the transforming grace of God there is a new part of our character which longs for our neighbor to be blessed.

Thus NOT to pray for the enemy is to contradict what we have become through grace. So truly we must pray for the ones we find most difficult to minister to. But we also ought to solicit prayer on our behalf to minister.

Ephesians 6:19-20, “And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”

Truly though it is part of our redeemed nature to seek the good of all, nevertheless the sinful flesh still remains. Accordingly, if we are going to “Bless our enemies” it will only be by the grace of Christ. It is this grace which will result in a boldness which is unnatural to our world.

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<sup>12</sup> Compare Philippians 4:2



Brothers and sisters, so armed may God grant us the grace to honor from our heart those who have chosen to express their opposition to Christ by opposing us.

## **About Bethel Presbyterian Church**

*The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is published regularly.

## **VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO**

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon and the these notes can be found at [Dealing With Difficult People](#). The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on February 25, 2007. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.