



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

# **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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## **Ministering to Difficult People, Part 4**

### **Prohibition Against Bitterness**

We receive a very important exhortation in Hebrews 12.

Hebrews 12:4-5, “We have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:”

This verse contains what I call complementary commands. It is an exhortation which is given both positively and negatively. It is given positively in terms of what we ought to do. And it is given negatively in terms of what we ought to avoid that we might do what we ought to do.

Accordingly, positively we are to pursue peace with all men. But, negatively that will mean that we see that no root of bitterness springs up in our heart.

God doesn't want us to be bitter people. We must ever and always make it our passion to maintain healthy relationships. That is why Christ gave the command in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:23-24, “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be

reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.”

Truly we must “let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from [us]. . .” (Ephesians 4:31)

- What happens when “peace” is not enjoyed?
- What happens when an Euodia/Syntycha type relationship springs up?
- What do you do then?

Our passage contains the example of Samuel by which we are given the answer to these questions. The text represents the first time Samuel was confronted by Saul, who for him was a difficult person. Recall that Saul not only was the people's choice but that the people also had rejected Samuel.<sup>1</sup> BUT Saul also was not qualified for the job and did not love Israel. As such for Samuel there couldn't have been a more dreaded meeting than the one referenced in our passage.

And yet, as we have seen, far from cursing or avoiding Saul, Samuel endeavored to honor him, bless him, and enjoy table fellowship with him. Now, whether you realize it or not, this is the path that one must follow in order to be at peace with all men.<sup>2</sup> And it is also the path which we must follow in order to avoid the “root of bitterness” in our lives. So we would do well to follow Samuel as he followed Christ.<sup>3</sup>

## Hospitality

And yet Samuel's example continues. Honoring, blessing, and enjoying table-fellowship with Saul was not all that the prophet sought to do. He also showed his nemesis hospitality.

1 Samuel 9:19, “And Samuel answered Saul, and said, I am the seer: go up before me unto the high place; for ye shall eat with me to day, and to morrow I will let thee go, and will tell thee all that is in thine heart.”

The implication here is that Saul NOT ONLY was going to eat with the prophet and so enjoy a place of honor at his table, BUT he also was going to spend the night at his house. And that's exactly what happened. Following the meal we read this text:

1 Samuel 9:25-26, “And when they were come down from the high place into the city, Samuel communed with Saul upon the top of the house.<sup>4</sup> And they arose early: and it came to pass about the spring of the day, that Samuel called Saul to the top of the house, saying, Up, that I may send thee away. And Saul arose, and they went out both of them, he and Samuel, abroad.”

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

<sup>2</sup> Compare Hebrews 12:14

<sup>3</sup> Compare 1 Corinthians 11:1

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew is difficult at this point such that some translations have opted for the LXX rendition which does not contain the words, “Samuel spoke with Saul on the roof.” The rationale for favoring the LXX is that Samuel spoke with Saul the next morning (cf. 1 Samuel 10). As such, the Majority Text must therefore be a scribal gloss.

Yet this does not do justice to the tenor of this pericope as it relates to Samuel's treatment of Saul. Samuel here is blessing this man. Accordingly, to suggest that the prophet brought him home and then left him to himself violates what we know about Samuel (and for that matter, most Jews). Truly, as many commentaries suggest, Samuel spoke late into the evening with Saul, holding a conversation which would have prepared the future king for 1 Samuel 10!

Following the sacrifice and the meal, Saul walked with Samuel to the city. Now, get the picture presented in this passage. Next to Samuel was a man, as we have seen, whose existence was hostile to Samuel's calling and who eventually would do him much harm. And yet far from rudeness or harm, Samuel allowed this man to penetrate deeply into his life. It is a scene that foreshadows the image of Christ walking with His disciples, ones who eventually would do Him much harm.

Now the architecture of the typical Jewish home at this time reveals a one roomed dwelling made of mud walls and a roof that was flat, reinforced, and so built to be a place to sit and enjoy fellowship under the stars or in the cool of the morning, much like a large porch in our day.<sup>5</sup>

Well it was to this porch that Samuel and Saul retired. There they continued the fellowship which was begun at the meal and talked into the night. Yet at some point Samuel parted and joined his family in the dwelling below leaving Saul and his servant to enjoy a good night of sleep on this platform under the stars. In fact so restful was the sleep, Samuel had to wake Saul and his servant the next morning.

Now once again we fail to realize the implication of this verse on account of our culture and lack of familiarity with the life setting of the Jew. We read of Saul spending the night with Samuel and we assume that Samuel must have liked Saul. Together they obviously had much in common even though Saul had never met Samuel; nevertheless they both were Jews and so must have considered each other as family.

Regardless of what we might think, the bottom line is that Saul and Samuel couldn't have been total strangers for who would invite a total stranger to their home and care for them?

Brothers and sisters, these assumptions are wrong! And we do injury to this passage if we hold them. Don't miss it.

Samuel here is not caring for a distant relative or a friend of a friend. Rather in this text he is taking into his house a total stranger, a difficult person, and one who would do him much harm!

And yet whether you realize it or not, this is Judaism at its best! Samuel could not have been a better picture of Christ than when he brought this stranger, this hostile stranger, into his home. To show you this, let me give you a "Theology of the 'Stranger'" from Scripture something rarely spoken about today and yet that which permeates the Bible.

First of all notice that in the Old Testament the child of God was specifically called to care for the stranger.

Leviticus 19:33-34, "And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God."

From this we see that for some odd reason, the stranger was to hold a special place in the heart of God's people.

And why was that?

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Deuteronomy 22:8

God holds the stranger in a special place in His heart.

Psalm 146:1-2, "Praise ye the LORD. Praise the LORD, O my soul. While I live will I praise the LORD: I will sing praises unto my God while I have any being."

Now, why is the Psalmist so moved?

Psalm 146:9, "The LORD preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and widow: but the way of the wicked he turneth upside down."

The psalmist here is beside himself as he ascribes praise to God because among other things, it was on account of the protection that God afforded the stranger! When David wanted to pull out the "big guns" in his appeal for God to be kind to him, listen to his supplication:

Psalm 39:12, "Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were."

Because of the special place that the stranger had in God's economy, David took upon himself this title in the hope that he would receive the kindness that God extends to the stranger. He says: "God I can't take it any longer; treat me like a stranger!"

Finally, notice the subsequent ethic to which the Jew was held.

Zechariah 7:9-10, "Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart."

One of the marks of authentic Christianity in the Bible is how the stranger was treated! Kindness and compassion was best seen when the child of God extended grace NOT just to his brother, for the Gentiles did this.<sup>6</sup> BUT to the stranger as well!

From all of this I hope you see that Biblically the "stranger" held a special place in the Kingdom of God. As such, the stranger was to be the object of care, concern, love, and support!

Why was that?

Why did God command His people to care for strangers?

Secondly notice that the child of God was called to care for the stranger because at one time we once were strangers and God cared for us!

Exodus 22:21, "Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Exodus 23:9, "Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."

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<sup>6</sup> Compare Matthew 5:47

Leviticus 19:33-34, “And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

Leviticus 25:35-36, “Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in meteyard, in weight, or in measure. Just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin, shall ye have: I am the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt.”

From all of this we get the big picture.

Why was the child of God to be so kind to a stranger?

Because God had been kind to them when they were strangers! And this same ethic continues into the New Testament.

Ephesians 2:12-13, “That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.”

And yet we're not finished for while we were strangers and aliens who enjoyed compassion and love from God such that we became members of God's household, nevertheless as it pertains to this world, today we remain aliens and strangers!

1 Peter 2:11, “Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.”

The significance here is that according to the Jewish world-view during Bible times, the Gentile was viewed as the stranger. Yet amongst the people of God in Christ that designation would be no more. For though we have been saved by Christ and so made a friend of God, nevertheless we remain strangers in this world! Thus we read of the Old Testament saints.

Hebrews 11:13, “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”

As such today the stranger still has an important place in our ministry!

Matthew 25:35-40, “For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

If you understand all that we've seen, this text makes perfect sense. NOT ONLY is the care we give to the stranger a reflection of the genuineness of our faith! BUT how we treat a stranger sets a standard of how we want God to treat us. Truly, to

- Visit them.
- Love them.
- Help them.
- Care for them.

Is to proclaim to God, “So do likewise to me!” (which you will recall was David's prayer in Psalm 39)

In fact so foundational was the treatment of strangers in the New Testament that it actually became a qualification of the elder.

1 Timothy 3:2, “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, **given to hospitality**, apt to teach.”

When it came time to select men who would shepherd the flock of God, who should the church call? Among other things Paul said, “One who loves the stranger!”

All of this serves as the background for our text and Samuel's treatment of a very difficult person in his life named Saul.

When Samuel invited Saul to stay with him provided this future thorn a place to lay his head for the night and brought this total stranger into his home, what was going on?

Samuel was extending to Saul the grace he himself had received from God. As such, Samuel was reflecting the face and affections of Christ to this difficult person. And thereby Samuel was fulfilling the divine calling that rested upon his life mercy, kindness, and love to the stranger!

From Samuel's example we conclude that when God brings a difficult person into your life such that alienation and estrangement abound — when a brother or sister becomes a stranger to you — you as a child of God have the opportunity to participate in a most glorious drama! NOT only do we get to proclaim Christ by honoring, blessing, fellowshiping with the difficult Christian but we get to be as Christ when we give to that individual the love that the Savior gave to us when we were strangers!

This brothers and sisters is what hospitality is all about! It epitomized Samuel's actions toward Saul! And it must characterize our ministry when it comes to difficult people!

And yet unfortunately rarely does this characterize our ministries. Think of the difficult person or the one who has done you harm. What has been your response?

Possibly you have broken off contact. Perhaps you no longer speak to them. Perhaps you have mock conversations in your head where you powerfully rebuke them and dominate them. And perhaps inwardly you are longing for their downfall or at least for them to get what's coming to them.

I can so accurately describe your conduct here because I too have traversed this well-worn road!

Why do we act this way? Why in the face of the difficult person do we flee from the opportunity to show this stranger the kindness we ourselves have received from Christ?

There can be but one answer. It is because of arrogance! Yes we're sinful; but never would we do to

someone what they have done to us and that's our downfall!

In 2 Peter 1 Paul exhorts the child of God unto “brotherly kindness” and “love.”

2 Peter 1:5-7, “And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.”

What a beautiful picture of Christ, if we would live it. To be a person who reflects

- Diligence.
- Moral excellence.
- Knowledge.
- Self-control.
- Perseverance.
- Godliness.
- Brotherly kindness.
- Love.

Truly what would our relationships be like if this characterized them?

And yet we lack these qualities, don't we? When it comes to the stranger or the difficult person, love and kindness is not on the docket. Rather we live for vindication, exaltation, and domination.

Why do we lack these virtues?

2 Peter 1:9, “But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.”

Do you see it?

The lack of grace on the part of the child of God is attributed to arrogance, a denial of the depths of our own depravity, and a refusal to accept the fact that we too were a stranger AND an enemy, and God loved us!

That is why it is so important for us never to “forget from where we have fallen” (Revelation 2:5). It is not so that we might walk around with a gloomy face- beating ourselves saying, “Look where I have fallen!” Rather it is so that grace might be our offering, love might be our banner, Christ might be our perfume, and God might get the glory.

Toward this end I want to bring you back in time to our passage such that you might behold the true context of Samuel's hospitality. Samuel has just participated in a worship service in which three sacrifices were given: A sin offering, a burnt offering, and a peace offering.

Now as a genuine child of God, as a redeemed individual, Samuel would not merely have beheld a sacrifice that day. Rather he would have participated in a drama whereby in the sin offering he held in his hands the Lamb of God, His Savior! He had just gazed into His eyes, confessed his sin, and then killed this Lamb!

In the burnt offering he once again would have held in his hands the Lamb of God! He would have slit His throat on account of his calling unto the Lord as a child of God; the Lord had a claim on his entire person. And then he offered the Lamb of God in his own place as a sacrifice of dedication (Christ only can do that which we are called to do)!

In the peace offering he would have housed the Savior for four days in which he brought Him into his home ate with Him, walked with Him, and communed with Him. And then he led this Lamb to the slaughter as the basis of his fellowship with God. Here he would have sacrificed that which had become part of his family that which was dear to himself. But then he would have brought the remains of the animal to the dining hall and enjoyed a peace meal with God!

Through it all Samuel would have been painfully aware that all that was inflicted on the sacrifice should have been inflicted upon himself on account of his sin. Now so moved and so filled with joy he's just seen and fellowshiped with Christ how could the prophet treat Saul, this difficult person, this total stranger, with anything less than kindness? How could he hold against this man that which God no longer held against him?

Grace transforms the sinner and enables him to participate in the drama of redemption, forgiveness, and self-denial. And so to the degree that you know the grace of God on account of your sin, it will be to that degree you will extend that grace to the estranged people in your life.

Now let us put this on a practical level. This doesn't mean that you go out and find total strangers and invite them into your home to stay the night. Nor does this mean that you pick up hitch-hikers on the road and bring them into your home. These things should only be done if one can impart Christ's grace, and His face and affections.<sup>7</sup>

Behind all hospitality is NOT the caring for the physical needs of someone BUT showing Christ's mercy to someone who is just like you, that's the issue! This is the essence of Biblical hospitality; that ultimately is what was behind Samuel's actions in our text.

What about the difficult person, the enemy, engaged in the active and so purposed service of Satan?

According to 2 John 10-11 we are NOT to help them on their way or even give them a greeting because in aiding God's enemies we oppose God and help (not bless) the enemy. Ah, but to the rest:

- The stranger.
- The alien.
- The difficult person.
- The enemy.

we must understand that God has brought them into our lives that we might participate in the drama of eternity whereby we impart to them the grace that we ourselves have received!

May God so find us doing when He comes!

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<sup>7</sup> The inviting of total strangers into ones home should be done only with great caution. And this is not advocating that children should minister to strangers



## **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 Part 4](#) . 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 March 25, 2007. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.