



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 6 Issue 12

April 1, 2007

Ministering to Difficult People, Part 5

Pouting Children

I always think it is interesting to watch young children at play, because so much can be learned from them. For example, as a parent I have learned that at times young children endeavor to punish their playmates with their own misery.

I am sure most parents know what I am talking about. There is this group of children who are kicking a ball around in the backyard. One of the younger kids doesn't get the ball as often as they'd like. And so that child marches to the corner of the yard, plops down, folds his arms, sticks out the lower lip, and portrays a most pitiable sight. In essence this child is saying: If you don't let me play I'll punish you by being miserable!

I've had the opportunity to minister to a couple of my own children who have opted for this course of action. I usually go out and hold the following conversation:

Do you see your brothers and sisters? Yes.

Are they having fun? Yes.

Do you think they even notice you sitting here? ...No.

So ultimately who are you punishing as you sit here pouting? ...Yourself!

Ahh, the thought-process of a child!

And yet, it just isn't our children. Perfectly healthy Christians, adults, can be found harming themselves in response to a difficult person. I know this is hard to believe, but it is true!

Jack has gotten the best of John (both are Christians), and do you know what John does in response? Rather than letting the offense go or talking to Jack, he grows bitter in his heart and so meditates upon the wrong on his bed and he allows Jack to enter into some of the most intimate times of his life, by virtue of his obsession with him. He thinks about him constantly at family gatherings, his child's birthday party, his anniversary, and even while he is on vacation.

Bitterness is a door into the deepest part of our soul! Those who choose to live with it open the door and so bring deep into their hearts the one with whom they are angry. The result is that he walks around irritated, pre-occupied, and angry.

Now let me ask you this question: In this situation who is the one who is the one injured? The answer is the one who becomes embittered on account of the difficult person!

Listen to God's word of warning when it comes to bitterness- to dealing with difficult people.

James 3:14, "But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth."

Both bitterness and envy cause one to respond to an enemy improperly. When we respond in our flesh to a difficult person, the result is bitterness and jealousy. Bitterness and jealousy lead us down the slippery slope of compromise in our walks. According to James, it will make you arrogant and to lie against the truth!

From this I hope you see that we must choose a different route when dealing with difficult people.

But what route ought we to choose?

Samuel models the correct route for us. Thus far in our study we have seen that this passage contains the first meeting between Samuel and a very difficult person... Saul. Saul represented a hostile take-over to Samuel. After God and the prophet were rejected by the people, the Lord sent Saul to be the people's choice for king. Thus Saul represented to Samuel NOT only his replacement BUT the essence of worldliness — Saul was a king like the nations. Saul was a man who would never love Israel as Samuel did!

And yet, Samuel did not respond to Saul in anger, bitterness, malice or deceit. Samuel refused to punish Saul with his own misery. Samuel honored Saul. Samuel endeavored to bless Saul. Samuel enjoyed table fellowship with Saul. And Samuel was hospitable towards Saul.

The result of Samuel's action was that Samuel did not become a bitter old man. And as a prophet, he remained useful in God's kingdom for many years to come.

Speak the Word of God

Now, let's consider a final exhortation arising from Samuel's example. Notice when it comes to difficult people we must speak the word of God to them.

1 Samuel 9:26-27, “**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.** And as they were going down to the end of the city, Samuel said to Saul, Bid the servant pass on before us, (and he passed on,) but stand thou still a while, that I may shew thee the word of God.”

After rousing Saul and his servant from their sleep, Samuel escorted them on their way. And once again, we do not read of rudeness or superficiality here. Though Samuel is dealing with a difficult person, he is no hurry to get him out of the way. Accordingly, leaving the house, all three men went out into the street.

Now our knowledge of ancient Jewish cities suggests a town-house type setting where a series of one story homes would have been butted up against each other. So coming off the roof, Saul and his servant would have descended a ladder (which leads from inside the dwelling to the roof) and then they would have walked out the front door onto the street with Samuel.

Once there, Samuel still did not say “goodbye.” He continued walking with Saul taking every opportunity to bless him and so prepare him for what lay before him in the future.

And that brings us to the fifth and final response of Samuel to Saul. Notice the text:

1 Samuel 9:27, “And as they were going down to the end of the city, Samuel said to Saul, Bid the servant pass on before us, (and he passed on,) but stand thou still a while, **that I may shew thee the word of God.**”

This is striking. Yes Samuel was a prophet. And so, yes, he was in the business of speaking God's word ¹ however, many a prophet wasn't so faithful and so didn't always speak the word of God.

The Disobedient Prophet

1 Kings 13 gives the account of the prophet of Bethel. This older prophet wanted to fellowship with the young prophet whom God was clearly using for His glory. And in order to get the prophet to stay and eat with him, the older prophet pursued his own agenda and spoke his OWN word.

1 Kings 13:18, “He said unto him, I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the LORD, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. But he lied unto him.”

Now brothers and sisters, the result of this prophet's selfishness was the death of the young man with whom he sought to eat.

Just because you are a prophet that doesn't mean you are sinless! As a sinner, Samuel easily could have used his office for harm (as did the prophet in 1 Kings 13). Thus to assume that Samuel's actions here naturally followed on account of his office is to miss the human context and so down-play the significance of Samuel's response to Saul. Samuel spoke the word of God to Saul!

You say, “What else could he have spoken?”

Well, his own word... his own opinion... his own thoughts!

¹ Compare 1 Samuel 4:1

Recall, Paul after the high priest ordered him slapped, he did not speak God's word, but his own.

Acts 23:3, "Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whitened wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?"

Or, Job's wife after suffering so greatly along with Job, notice what she said:

Job 2:9, "Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die."

And then there are Korah's sons who were moved to anger on account of a bitter providence from God, notice their words:

Psalm 44:9-12, "But thou hast cast off, and put us to shame; and goest not forth with our armies. Thou makest us to turn back from the enemy: and they which hate us spoil for themselves. Thou hast given us like sheep appointed for meat; and hast scattered us among the heathen. Thou sellest thy people for nought, and dost not increase thy wealth by their price."

Of course none of this was true. Yet it didn't matter! This is how these boys felt. And so this is what they spoke!

Yet, observe the result. With unquestionable satisfaction, they gave God a piece of their mind!

We could think of Joab. When David grieved a little too openly over the death of his son, notice what the general said:

2 Samuel 19:5-6, "And Joab came into the house to the king, and said, Thou hast shamed this day the faces of all thy servants, which this day have saved thy life, and the lives of thy sons and of thy daughters, and the lives of thy wives, and the lives of thy concubines; In that thou lovest thine enemies, and hatest thy friends. For thou hast declared this day, that thou regardest neither princes nor servants: for this day I perceive, that if Absalom had lived, and all we had died this day, then it had pleased thee well."

We could go on and on considering examples where God's people, men and women of God, stood in the presence of a difficult person or situation and rather than speaking as God would speak (God's word) they did that which most of us wish we could do more often; they spoke their own mind and freely communicated what they inwardly thought!

This is what makes Samuel's final response in this text so amazing. Here he had a naive, yet wicked individual who someday would do great harm to God's kingdom and himself. And rather than take advantage of his position and give the future adversary a piece of his mind and endeavoring to make Saul's life miserable, Samuel served God such that he brought God's word to Saul- nothing less or more!

And from this we see a fifth and final response when it comes to difficult people: NOT ONLY must we

- Honor them.
- Seek to bless them.
- Endeavor to enjoy table-fellowship with them.
- Show them hospitality.
- BUT we must also show restraint and rather than speaking our word, we must speak God's word to

them!

Such is the exhortation arising from Samuel's example!

What practically does this mean? We're not prophets who have been formally called to dispense God's word to people. How do we at this point follow Samuel as he followed Christ?²

I have already alluded to the answer. You must see that there is a contrast to be made between our word and God's word.

“Our word” represents:

- Our opinions and how we've been hurt.
- What we really think.
- An attempt at vindication... justification... domination.

****in contrast****

“God's word” represents:

- His will.
- His plans.
- How He would have us speak to an enemy.
- That which furthers His kingdom and program.

Edify Our Enemy

From this perspective we clearly see the calling... it is to speak unto the edification of our enemy.

Ephesians 4:29, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.”

Though this is a general call for all situations, nevertheless Paul's words apply to our topic of ministering to difficult people. I want you to notice two phrases here. The first is *corrupt communication*.³ This phrase means to decay or rot. It refers to a literal or figurative rotting away.

Now, this word generally is translated *unserviceable* as opposed to being *offensive*. The focus here is not on the offensive odor that arises from the process of decay, but upon the resulting worthless state.

Matthew 13:48, “Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad⁴ away.”

It is not that the bad fish were rotting or offensive. Rather, it is that they were of no use to the fisherman! And that is the idea behind *corrupt communication*.

² Compare 1 Corinthians 11:1

³ This is also rendered *unwholesome word*. Σαπρος sapros

⁴ σαπρος sapros

Matthew 7:17, “Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt⁵ tree bringeth forth evil fruit.”

Here Christ is saying that the corrupt tree brings forth fruit of no benefit. From this we see that the *corrupt communication* is a word that is of no use or benefit to those listening.⁶

And yet, secondly, we can be more specific here. It is a word that does NOT give grace to those who hear.

Ephesians 4:29, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, **that it may minister grace⁷ unto the hearers.**”

Generally speaking, *grace* is the means whereby an individual is enabled to do spiritual good. For example, Paul said:

1 Corinthians 15:10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”

Paul attributed his ability to do any spiritual good to the grace of God. Thus he wrote this:

Romans 12:6, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith;”

Grace, God’s grace, is that which ENABLES the Christian to fulfill the calling which God has placed on their lives. Now when we put the two words together, we see that the “wholesome word” is the word that “gives grace.” It represents any speech which encourages spiritual growth.

When dealing with difficult people our speech ought to be a conduit through which grace is given to the spiritual benefit of the recipient. Accordingly as men and women of Christ we must avoid any speaking or utterance that

- Is empty or vain.
- Works to the detriment of its subject or hearers.
- Is careless and non-constructive.
- Puts down.
- Places oneself above another.

****rather**** strive to speak according to God's word/will which always will have as its aim

- God's glory.
- The furtherance of God's Kingdom- and not our own.
- The building up of our hearers- unto their spiritual growth in grace.

That is what Samuel was after in our text. He could have cursed Saul, giving him ample reason for rebellion against God. Instead he escorted him to the edge of town. He sought a private hearing with him. And all of this with the ultimate aim of enabling Saul to be the king which God would have him to

⁵ σαπρος sapros

⁶ Compare Matthew 12:33, Luke 6:43

⁷ χαρις charis

be. And its goal was the securing the best for the people of God.

This is how one must speak to a difficult person!

Now this doesn't mean that our speech is to be sappy or phony. There are times when our speech might hurt someone, but that will only be because the one to whom we are speaking is in rebellion against God and we're trying to help them.

For example, later in Samuel's life, he spoke some strong words to Saul whereby the king was informed that God had rejected him.⁸ Samuel didn't do this to hurt Saul, Saul was doing a good job of that on his own. Rather, Samuel spoke these words because he genuinely cared about God and the king.⁹

Indeed! What must be our response be to a difficult person? We must endeavor to speak unto their growth in grace, encouragement, edification and not our own vindication.

THAT IS WHAT CONSTITUTES SPEAKING GOD'S WORD.

You say, "This is going to be hard for you have no idea how much I've been hurt by this one!"

True enough! However let me encourage you as we close with two more suggestions on how to fulfill the calling of 1 Samuel 9.

Hatred against God

Thus far we have seen that in order for us to Minister to Difficult People we must recognize that it ultimately is God who is the object of the enemy's venom.

Rejoice in Christ

Secondly, we must learn to rejoice in Christ alone.¹⁰ Recall Paul's exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche: You've got Christ, What are the praises of man?!

Pray

Third we must pray. Not only for our enemy.¹¹ But also we must pray for one another as we all have been charged with this difficult calling.¹²

Bless our Enemy

Fourthly, we must understand that blessing our enemy is the very reason God saved us; the purpose

⁸ Compare 1 Samuel 15:22-23

⁹ Compare 1 Samuel 15:35

¹⁰ Compare Philippians 4:4

¹¹ Compare Matthew 5:44

¹² Compare Ephesians 6:19-20

behind God's calling us into His Kingdom.¹³

Guard our Heart

Fifthly, we must guard our heart.¹⁴ This means that we must stop meditating upon a difficult person's evil actions, unkind words, foibles. But instead we focus upon that which is “praiseworthy in them.”

Christ's Cleansing Grace

Sixthly, we must know again and again the cleansing grace of Christ.¹⁵ Without grace we will know little of our own sinfulness and hence we will become proud and arrogant. Remember, grace always runs downhill! But knowing the grace of Christ we will be able to confess our sin which will dissipate the judgmental attitude, and enable us genuinely to forgive!

Christ Centered Relationships

Seventhly, one must strive to be Christ-centered or Kingdom-centered in all relationships.¹⁶ Paul said this:

1 Corinthians 2:2, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

Truly Paul's speech as it related to the Corinthians did not center around his own enjoyment, amusement, or betterment. Rather, it revolved around that which furthered Christ and His kingdom. This was true of his relationship with the Thessalonians as well.

1 Thessalonians 2:11-12, “As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children, That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.”

Whether it is from Paul's example or Samuel's, the point is the same. In every relationship we must strive and endeavor to further God's Kingdom (which consists of people with the need to grow in grace) as opposed to our own kingdom. This is what constitutes a healthy relationship.

In fact from this we derive a rather simple test: When we are at odds with another person, the division itself reveals the basis of that relationship. If the division is over anything other than Christ or something pertaining to His Kingdom, then at that moment we must see that OUR RELATIONSHIP with the other person is flawed — we are the ones needing reproof not our enemy.

****but****

Is the division on account of Christ, then with grief and sadness we entrust our enemy to God. So strive

¹³ Compare 1 Peter 3:8, and Psalm 109:26

¹⁴ Compare Proverbs 4:23 and Philippians 4:8

¹⁵ Compare Exodus 15:25b Luke 7:47, and Matthew 7:3-4

¹⁶ Compare 1 Corinthians 2:2, 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12, 1 Samuel 9:26-27

to be Christ-centered/Kingdom-centered in all your relationships!

Biblical Hope

Eighthly, cultivate a biblical hope.

2 Timothy 4:18, “And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

How was Paul able to minister to the difficult people in his life? Or how will the Christian be able to turn the other cheek and keep ministering to ones who have made themselves our enemies? Or how did Samuel do what he did here?

We must know that in the end there is the glorious reward of eternity for which God has prepared us. Our “payment” for a life of service in Christ's name is not of this world. God will personally deliver us from evil and wicked men/women and bring us safely to His heavenly Kingdom.¹⁷

Brothers and sisters, if you know that the end is secured from the beginning, you know from the start that in the end, “We win!”

Then we can pass through multiple deaths and yet not lose our confidence, joy, and anticipation! With this, may God grant us the grace to be a vessel in His hands unto His glory.

¹⁷ 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

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About the Preacher

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