



Helping “Difficult” People in Your Church

by Timothy S. Lane

One of the most challenging aspects of pastoral ministry is dealing with difficult people. These are people who need help but seem to challenge you at every turn as you try to provide that help. How should the church respond and minister in these situations? Everyone has to relate to difficult people—and most of us have *been* difficult people ourselves at one time or another! Therefore, every Christian should know how the gospel guides us in these relationships.

Two passages that guide me in this are 1 Peter 4:8 and Ephesians 3:14-19. In the 1 Peter passage, we are called to “love one another deeply.” The word translated deeply can also mean “constant”. “Keep love constant” would be a good translation. The word describes something that is stretched or extended. The love of the saints keeps stretching, in both depth and endurance. This connects nicely with Ephesians 3 where Paul prays that we would “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge...” Persevering love grows out of the gospel. You must start here if you are going to find the strength and incentive to go the distance with people.

With these scriptures as guidance, I offer a list of ten pastoral skills that I learned as I disciplined one individual who came with many difficult problems.

I will call her Nancy. She is in her 40’s and seems to be a sincere believer in Christ. She is in a bad marriage. She is someone who would classically be labeled bipolar or manic-depressive. She has successfully isolated herself from people in her church because once they get to know her, they become overwhelmed by her. Here is the challenge: How do I love Nancy well? What will it look like to be useful to her in her growth in grace? These lessons have taken me many years to learn—and I am still learning with other “Nancys” that God graciously and wisely places in my life. I will speak directly to you, the reader, about the difficult people God calls you to serve. Sometimes I will refer to Nancy in particular and sometimes to difficult people as a whole.

Lesson 1. Pay Attention to the Heart (Yours and Theirs)

The category of the heart must be kept on the radar at all times.

- **Yours**—God has ordained that this person be in your life. The first pastoral exercise is to pay attention to the common temptations to sin that different kinds of difficult people pose to **you**. Manipulative “borderline personality”? Angry and oblivious? Addicted and deceitful? Unstable “bipolar”? You may be tempted to overpower, or to appease, or to avoid such people. You will likely move typically in one of these directions or bounce back and forth between them in an effort to get some relief. You end up, if you are not carefully attending to your own heart, sinfully responding to the challenges that the difficult person is bringing into your life. If you do this, how then can you call this person to respond to life in godly ways when you aren’t even responding in godly ways? This, by the way, is true of any relationship.
- **Theirs**—As you get to know difficult people, you begin to see the particular types of suffering that each person has experienced. You begin to see typical ways that the person tends to respond. With people who evidence what may be a more physiological component, keep that in mind as you seek to pastor them well. With someone who is manic-depressive, don’t let behavior on either extreme of the continuum fool you. Don’t get hijacked by the momentary emotional state. With Nancy, many elements were at work at any given moment when I would talk with her: a bad day with her husband, children, person in the church, no sleep, fear of the future... or a good day with her husband, children, person in the church, and lots of sleep. Each person is responding in either a godly or ungodly way to events. What patterns do you see as you get to know them and move towards them? What are their typical ungodly ways of dealing with life and what tends to drive those behaviors? There will be opportunities to help a person see these things. Find simple Scripture passages that will provide guidance during these times, and experience the joys of biblical repentance in the midst of the difficulty.

Lesson 2. Clearly Define Who Sets the Agenda

The common language that is often used here is the language of “boundaries”. I think that can be helpful but it does not go deep enough. Who sets the agenda in any relationship? God does. The only difference is *what* the agenda will be not *who* sets it. God sets the agenda in all of our relationships and He does here as well. Recognizing this, reminds you that you—the helper—are also under the gaze of God. The language of “boundaries” typically gives the impression that as the helper, you must set boundaries in order to protect yourself from being taken advantage of. If we think of this in terms of God setting the agenda, the end result will be you loving the person well rather than just protecting yourself.

With Nancy, because God set the agenda, there were times when I made sacrifices that were appropriate. Some of these decisions affected my family and lifestyle: the phone call at home late at night, or the sudden appearance at my house or office. Then there were other times that I told her I could not speak with her at that moment but would be willing to talk to her at some later time that we both agreed would work. There were times though, that I was tempted to agree to speak to her immediately because I did not want her to dislike me, or I was fearful that she would tell someone in the church that I had not cared for her like a good pastor should. Saying no at these times was an expression of godliness and love for Nancy. There were instances that I told her to go home and get some sleep and then call me that afternoon at the office. **Grace-driven acceptance of a person *does not mean open-ended availability.***

It is important that you take the initiative to communicate some guidelines for the relationship and to alert the person that there will be many times when you will not be available. Be clear about when and where you may be contacted. Do this with love and then have godly courage to say no a few times early on when you think the person has moved beyond what is appropriate for the moment. If you are too available, it will likely lead to anger in you, because you assume that the person should respect boundaries like other people do. Don't make that assumption. Another reason to set limits for people is because otherwise it may be too easy for them to go to you before they cry out to God. You, in effect, could be the very person who is making it too easy for them to avoid dealing directly with and depending upon Christ.

Lesson 3. Have Biblically Realistic/Optimistic Goals

Here is a place where your theology of the Christian life means everything. The doctrine of sanctification sees the Christian life through the biblical lens of slow, steady, back and forth progress. It's realistic: change is incremental. It's also optimistic: there *is* progress. For me, as I got a handle on the practical pastoral implications of this biblical understanding of the Christian life, it made all the difference in the world.

When Nancy was really depressed, I was thankful that she was still coming to church and seeking help. When she was particularly upbeat and euphoric, I would avoid being duped and then let down when she was depressed again. Without this leveling view of the Christian life, you will be a manic-depressive enabler!

Lesson 4. Redefine Love

If you do not re-define love biblically, you will be very disappointed if you are called to help other people— especially difficult people. A succinct definition of love is found in I John 3:16, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” That's it. Love means death. Let me nuance that some. Loving people well is the most inefficient thing you could ever do, but according to Jesus, it is the godliest thing you can ever do. I John 3:16 goes on to say, “And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” Another way of thinking about this is exchanging the word “servant hood” in place of the word “success.” ***We are not called to fix people; we are called to serve***

them. The sooner we lay hold of this biblical priority, the sooner we will not be undone when someone does not “get better” right away or remains in our lives for a long time. Imagine in John 13, when Jesus washes his disciple’s feet—if he thought in terms of success—he would have kicked the bucket over, screamed at the disciples and stomped out. When you look at the characters in the room that night, success would not have been a word that would come to mind. And yet Jesus served. Paul Miller makes this wonderful observation in his book *Love Walked Among Us*, “Jesus’ tenderness with people suggested to me a new, less “efficient,” way of relating. Love, I realized, is not efficient.”¹

It was through the “Nancys” in my life that I realized what it was like to work with people. It’s messy and inefficient and I don’t like that. And yet, it was just where God wanted me. I needed Nancy as much— if not more— than she needed me. I needed her in the sense that I needed to be more like Christ. I needed to see how much I wasn’t like him. I needed to see how desperately selfish I was and that if I did not redefine love along biblical lines, I would continue to be a selfish person who only met with people because I had to.

Lesson 5. Give the Person Hope

For someone like Nancy, change doesn’t seem to be something that is very visible or tangible. There were times when she was so discouraged that she thought suicide was a possible option. One of the practical ways to help someone like Nancy have hope is by clearly defining some things that can reasonably be accomplished and stating these in simple measurable ways.

Ask the person, “What do you want to see God do in your life over the next week?” You will be amazed how this reframes the person’s view of the future. This question encourages them to think about the possibilities of being different and of living differently in the coming week. Maybe their circumstances will not change, but maybe *they* can change instead. The simpler the goals are— the better. Do this within the context of the gospel and Christ’s covenant love for them.

Lesson 6. Call the Person to Serve

Another critical place a difficult person often needs to grow is in the area of loving others. The Bible says that everyone has been given gifts and can encourage, bear burdens, and be used in the lives of other people. As you attend to the heart issues in a person’s life and as you frame the relationship to serve the sanctifying purposes of God, a hopeful call to loving others is only appropriate.

Nancy had a husband and two children whom she could love and serve. She was surrounded by other wives who were struggling in their marriages. It is not good for difficult people to simply “take” from their families and friends. This is destructive behavior that is not pleasing to God and it is driven by a host of attitudes that God will

¹ Paul Miller, *Love Walked Among Us* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001). 30.

not bless. Calling people to serve others will move them towards people and outside of themselves. It will help them see that they are valuable members of the body of Christ, **and are not the only people who struggle.**

Lesson 7. Connect the Person with the Body of Christ

This is important for two reasons. First, it is only within the context of others that difficult people are going to die to themselves. Secondly, it is only within the context of other people that you can adequately help the person. My experience is that difficult people need a host of helpers that are all doing basically the same thing in concert with one another.

I always encouraged Nancy to stay connected. I knew that I was not sufficient for her growth. But that is nothing new, is it? We all need many people around us speaking into and acting in our lives and on our behalf. I would structure contexts for discipleship for her. Thankfully, she would do a lot of this on her own, too. Though sometimes her involvement with others was selfishly motivated, thankfully it was with wise women who knew how to love her well. She was also connected to a small group Bible study where she was surrounded by a group of people who would keep up with her.

Your failure to do this reveals as much about your heart as it does the heart of the difficult person. When people are overly needy, and we do not share the load, it reveals that we may be overly needy of their need of us!

Lesson 8. Work Wisely with Other Helpers

It is inevitable as you work with difficult people that you will be criticized by them. Sometimes they will do this to your face, but most of the time they will do it with others who are reaching out to them. The illustration that I think works here is the illustration of a child. If the child does not get what is wanted from one parent, the child will complain to other parent in an effort to get it. If you are helping a difficult person, chances are you are not the only person in their lives. They are amazingly connected! If you know this from the outset, you can begin to find out who else they depend on. With that information, you can wisely seek appropriate ways to make sure that the various helpers do not get caught between the complaints of the difficult person. When a difficult person complains to you about someone who has not helped them, use this as an opportunity to remind the difficult person that the person they are speaking about does care for them. Encourage the others to do this as well.

There were occasions with Nancy where I would have to remind her of how much God had been good to her by giving her the friends she had. It was also an opportunity to challenge her to learn to love even when she was not getting what she wanted from others.

Lesson 9. Connect the Person to Christ Himself

What could be more obvious and yet what could be least obvious. People need something and *someone* more than you. They need Christ. If you are not careful, you may be the one person that keeps them from him if you love yourself more than you love the difficult person. One of the temptations in pastoral ministry is to forget who the Chief Shepherd of the sheep is. A gentle reminder: *it is not you*. I remember being in the midst of a broader family crisis with Nancy. The weight of it all was coming down on me. Sometime that week a friend called me and sensed the weight in my voice. He spoke gently and lovingly to me when he said, “Tim, remember, you are not the ultimate shepherd of the sheep, Jesus is.” His words cut and healed at the same time. They called me to repent of my people, control, and success idolatries. At the same time, they reminded me that Jesus was more concerned for and able to help this person than 1000 pastors working at once. We need to connect people to Christ to remind them as well as ourselves that we are not the Chief Shepherd of the sheep.

Lesson 10. Remember: We are *All* Difficult People

Finally, a helpful reminder that is always appropriate to remember as we serve difficult people. From God’s point of view, aren’t we all difficult people? Romans 5:8 sums it up nicely when it says, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Verse 10 goes on to say, “For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life.”

Conclusion

These 10 lessons are practical ways that I have grown in wisdom within the context of pastoral ministry. Helping difficult people *is* challenging but if you see it as extension of the gospel into the everyday lives of God’s people, your path will be clearer and your love more “constant” because it depends less on you and more on the God who calls you to do it.²

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