

Interacting with Difficult People

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Interacting With Difficult People?” Perhaps it should be: “Interacting with People.” Not that every person we meet inside and outside our congregations is difficult, but if we learn to deal with most anyone, those who are difficult won’t seem so difficult. Each of us is unique. We have different values, precepts, and experiences that make us special. Besides, people aren’t difficult, just different. For example: I like to do things slowly and get it right the first time. Someone else might like to just do things quickly, and if it is right, that is good. But if not, there is plenty of time to redo it. This might drive me up a wall, but I have learned how to deal with the differences.

Personalities come into play when we interact with others in our every day lives. Our personalities and those of others we interact with may vary with each encounter. I am sure everyone has heard the phrase “personality conflict.” I didn’t get along with him/her because our personalities clashed. Perhaps it wasn’t having a different personality, but that you didn’t understand the other person’s personality and how it interacted with your own.

Jesus gives two great Commandments. “Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, soul, and mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We could change that just a little to say, “Understand yourself and then understand your neighbor better.”

Understanding ourselves and our own difficult behavior helps us in interacting with those whom we come into contact with that we feel are difficult. This, of course, is humbling because it acknowledges that the difficult people out there are not so different from us. What pushes our buttons to turn us into difficult people? We can react to the difficult person or respond to him, the choice is ours. When we react to a difficult person or to anyone for that matter we might become very aggressive, complaining, passive, resistant, or even people pleasing. When we respond we take a few moments, collect our thoughts, and respond not to the behavior of the difficult person, but to what is underlying and making this person difficult.

When a person understands his own personality and understands why he does some of the things he does, or thinks some of the ways he thinks, he becomes more

self aware. Self-awareness is the key to understanding others. If I am an introverted personality and you are an extroverted personality, how should I relate to you or understand the differences?

Within your ministries, there will be people who seem to be difficult. It is said that a pastor needs the mind of a scholar, heart of a child, and the hide of a rhinoceros. If we keep these in mind it might help us to handle difficult, that is, different people.

We must realize that we will have conflicts and there will be people who just cause difficulties for us in ministry. At the heart of most conflicts are desires, either good or bad, that have become controlling demands. One of the first things we must get to is the heart of the conflict. Why is this person being so difficult? There is usually something under the surface of the difficulty that is causing this person to be in conflict with you. It could be something a previous pastor said or did. It could be something you said or did and are not aware of it causing any conflict or concern.

Can we grow in dealing with difficult people? The answer to that is yes. We can grow in our faith and reliance in God to handle each situation. Perhaps we should look at life as a school and difficult people can serve as our teachers. What can I learn from this situation about myself and others? We can understand that we are separate from our difficult person, and not be a codependent. How is this difficult person bringing out the negative reaction in me?

Many times difficult people come to us with criticism, making it very personal. We need to respond to criticism when it comes our way. First, we should consider the source: Who gave this criticism? Was it a chronic fault finder or a mature Christian? Was the criticism shared in anger or in kindness? Do not smooth things over if you do not agree with the criticism. Our job is to listen but not necessarily change due to criticism if it is not positive. We need to be careful not to abuse our authority. Make sure your job description is specific so that if there is ever criticism that you are not performing your duties, you have a specific document to look at and see if it is true. You could also think about walking in that person's shoes—empathy. Knowing the stress and other factors that the other person is going through might help to get to the heart of the conflict. Always remember when you are responding to criticism you are responsible for Christ-like behavior. Ask for forgiveness if you contributed to the difficulty. When the criticism has passed, don't fixate on it but pray about it. Let it go. Let go any feelings of anger, rejection, and self-pity. Keep criticism in perspective of the whole picture.

We don't enter congregations looking over our shoulders, becoming paranoid that anyone of our parishioners could be our difficult person. We are to be aware of who we are so that when difficult people arise, we will be more ready to manage them as Christ would: with prayer, care, love, and forgiveness.

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