

Dealing with Problem People

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Let me give you a simple but profound statement about the church: The church is the only society in the world in which membership is based on a single qualification--the candidate must be unworthy of membership. Therefore, every local church is an assembly of sinners who have been saved by God's redeeming grace, and you and I are among them.

It should come as no surprise that there are problem people in every church. In fact, if you assess yourself biblically, you'll have to agree that every Christian is a potential problem--it's a difference of maturity and obedience. But there are some in the church who are perpetually difficult. And others go through periods of growth or testing, during which they can become hard to deal with. In either case, you and I are called to serve them as we work out our commitment to love one another. So it's not a question of whether to serve, it's a question of how.

The apostle Paul helps us by identifying the problem groups we will all encounter in the church. See whether you find yourself, or others you know, in one of these groups: "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

That verse gives three main categories of problem people, and if your church is going to grow, you must embrace ministry to individuals from each group. Going to church is not just showing up on Sunday morning. The Lord wants you to understand those people, and He wants you to use the gifts He gave you to serve them. When you do, you'll be blessed to see how God uses you to help them change. And it will be your greatest joy to see them mature enough to help others.

The Wayward

Group number one is "the unruly." Let's call them the wayward. They're never in step. "Get with the program" is a slogan that suits them. When everyone else is moving ahead, they're going backward. Out of either apathy or rebellion, they've gone spiritually AWOL, and they're not interested in learning or serving.

How do you deal with the wayward? You admonish them. The Greek term means "to put sense into someone in light of the consequences." If you see believers who aren't doing their duty--not using their gifts, not being supportive of the team effort--come alongside them and put some sense into their heads. It's to be a gentle, loving warning, yet also have some passion in it. You should be motivated by a compassion that says, "I don't want you to keep going in that direction because God *will* chasten apathy and rebellion."

When you truly love someone, you don't hesitate to warn--you want that person to avoid the negative consequences, which are inevitable, and to enjoy the blessing of spiritual involvement. So confrontation is necessary. When you come to church, don't sit idly by while others struggle spiritually. Be involved in other believers' lives--especially the troublesome ones. They need you.

The Worried

The second group is "the fainthearted," a term that means "small souled." They are the worriers. Challenges threaten or frighten them. They hate change, love tradition, and avoid risk like the plague. All the issues of life seem far more than they can bear. They're usually sad, perpetually worried, sometimes in despair, and often discouraged. Consequently, they experience none of the thrill that adventure brings.

To deal with the worried, Paul said simply, "Encourage them." The idea is to come side-by-side and comfort them. If you know someone like that--fearful, worried, melancholy, or despairing--the Lord wants you to come alongside and develop a friendly relationship with that person. If you tend to be that way yourself, develop friendships with godly people who will console, comfort, strengthen, reassure, cheer, refresh, and soothe you from God's Word.

What kinds of encouragement bring the most relief? Here's a short list:

The encouragement of prayer to the God of all encouragement

The encouragement of a secure salvation

The encouragement of our sovereign God working out everything for the believer's good

The encouragement of the love of Christ

The encouragement of the final resurrection and the righting of all wrongs

All that and more will help the worried to abandon sinful anxiety, embrace Christian joy, and participate in the adventure of the Christian life.

The Weak

Paul calls the last group "the weak." They are the "weaker brethren" of Romans 14-15 and 1 Corinthians 8. Often these people come to Christ out of a particularly sinful lifestyle--they can be so hypersensitive to sin that they see things as sinful that aren't really sinful at all. A stronger Christian should never condemn a weaker brother for his over-scrupulous attitudes, but should rather restrict his liberties so he doesn't become a source of stumbling (Romans 14:13)--never teach him that it's okay to violate his conscience (Romans 14:23). If you are the stronger brother, be patient with and kind toward your weaker brother. Teach him so his conscience will be better informed, and help him to become a strong, vital, and productive member of the Body.

There are others in the "weak" category who tend to fall into the same sins over and over. They are spiritually and morally weak because they haven't developed habits of self-discipline. They embarrass themselves, their church, and their Lord. And thus they require a lot of attention.

How do you help them? Paul's word for "help" means "hold tightly to," or "support." Here's what that looks like in action: "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1-2). You help the weak by picking them up and then holding them up.

At the end of 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Paul sets the tone for our ministry to the problem people: "Be patient with everyone." Don't hurry them; don't be harsh with them; and don't drive them. Gently and tenderly lead them along. Watch your own behavior and leave the results to God.

Ministry to the problem people requires intimacy in fellowship. The church grows when the sheep help take care of the sheep--you must care enough to admonish the wayward, encourage the worried, and help the weak. That kind of ministry necessitates your involvement in other people's lives. When you commit yourself to that involvement, you'll avoid being numbered among the problem people; instead, you'll be part of the solution.

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