

# How to Deal with Difficult People in the Church: A Biblical Approach

Difficult people in the church can present some of the most challenging moments for pastors, elders, and congregants alike. They can test our patience, provoke our emotions, and expose our own sinful tendencies. However, in God's sovereign design, even difficult people play a role in shaping us more into the likeness of Christ. This article aims to offer biblical counsel on dealing with difficult people, both for our own growth in godliness and for the health of the church community.

## 1. Recognize the Purpose of Difficult People in God's Sovereignty

### God Uses Difficult Relationships to Refine Us

Scripture affirms that God uses trials to strengthen our faith and cultivate godly character. James 1:2-4 tells us to "count it all joy...when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." Difficult people are often part of these "trials," and God, in His wisdom, has placed them in our lives not by accident but with purpose.

Romans 8:28 assures us that "for those who love God all things work together for good." This doesn't mean difficult relationships are easy or enjoyable, but they serve as instruments to shape our character, teach us patience, and cultivate humility. God is sovereign over every person in our lives, including the difficult ones, and He often uses these situations to expose our own heart issues and refine our walk with Him.

## 2. Approach Difficult People with Humility and Self-Examination

### Take the Log Out of Your Own Eye

Before addressing any grievances with another person, Jesus commands us to first examine ourselves: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). Difficult relationships can easily turn into sources of self-righteousness if we focus only on the faults of others while ignoring our own sins. Humbly recognizing that we too fall short and require grace keeps us from becoming judgmental or resentful.

### Be Slow to Speak, Quick to Listen, and Slow to Anger

James 1:19-20 gives us wise counsel for how to engage with others, especially difficult people: "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." When dealing with a difficult person, rather than immediately reacting, it's wise to listen well, understand their perspective, and seek the Lord's wisdom before speaking. This not only helps prevent misunderstandings but also allows us to approach situations with a more Christ-like spirit.

## 3. Respond in Love, Even When It's Hard

### Love is Patient and Kind

The foundational command for Christians is to love one another (John 13:34-35), which includes loving those who may be difficult. First Corinthians 13 provides a template for this love: "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude." When someone is particularly challenging, it can be tempting to react in frustration, impatience, or avoidance. Yet, patience and kindness are marks of Christ-like love that we are called to show even to those who seem hardest to love.

### Bless Those Who Persecute You

Romans 12:14 encourages us to "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." While most difficult people in the church aren't overt persecutors, they can provoke similar feelings. Instead of letting

bitterness fester, Scripture calls us to bless and pray for those who hurt us. This doesn't mean we endorse sinful behavior, but we ask God to work in their hearts while also praying for our own.

## 4. Practice Forgiveness and Grace

### **Forgive as Christ Forgave You**

Forgiveness is central to our faith, and it's vital when dealing with difficult people. Colossians 3:13 reminds us, "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." We must remember that just as we have been forgiven much, we are called to extend that same grace to others. Forgiveness does not mean ignoring wrongdoing, but it does mean releasing resentment and not holding past wrongs against others.

### **Avoid Gossip and Slander**

When we're hurt or frustrated, it can be tempting to vent to others. However, Proverbs 6:16-19 lists "one who sows discord among brothers" as something God detests. Gossip and slander not only harm relationships but also damage the unity of the church. Ephesians 4:29 calls us to speak words that build others up rather than tear them down.

## 5. Address Issues Directly, with the Goal of Restoration

### **Go to Them Privately First**

Jesus provides a clear process for handling personal offenses in Matthew 18:15-17. If someone sins against you, "go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." This step is crucial because it respects the dignity of the individual and seeks restoration without unnecessary exposure. If the person listens, Scripture says, "you have gained your brother." This should be our ultimate goal: to reconcile relationships and restore unity.

### **Involve Others When Necessary**

If a private conversation doesn't resolve the issue, Jesus instructs us to involve one or two others (Matthew 18:16). This step provides accountability and wisdom while showing a commitment to restoration. However, if even this fails, Jesus says to involve the church. While we should always seek peace and unity, there are times when persistent sin must be addressed openly for the health of the church (1 Corinthians 5:1-5).

## 6. Set Boundaries When Appropriate

### **Be Wise in Your Interactions**

While we are called to love and forgive, it doesn't mean we must endure harmful behavior without boundaries. Proverbs 22:24 warns, "Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man." This passage reminds us of the wisdom in setting boundaries. When someone is persistently disruptive, divisive, or harmful, it may be necessary to limit close interactions. Boundaries can be set in a loving manner, seeking to prevent sin from spreading or creating a toxic environment in the church.

### **Guard the Flock**

As shepherds, pastors, and leaders are called to "pay careful attention...to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). In certain cases, leaders may need to intervene to protect the church from divisive individuals (Titus 3:10). While such actions should always be taken with wisdom, humility, and prayer, they are necessary for maintaining the church's health.

## 7. Rely on the Holy Spirit and Prayer

### **Pray for Wisdom and Patience**

James 1:5 promises that if we lack wisdom, we can ask God, who gives generously. Dealing with difficult people often requires wisdom beyond our own abilities. Prayer is essential not only for the challenging

individual but also for our own hearts. We need patience, humility, and love—all fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)—which God grants us through prayer and reliance on Him.

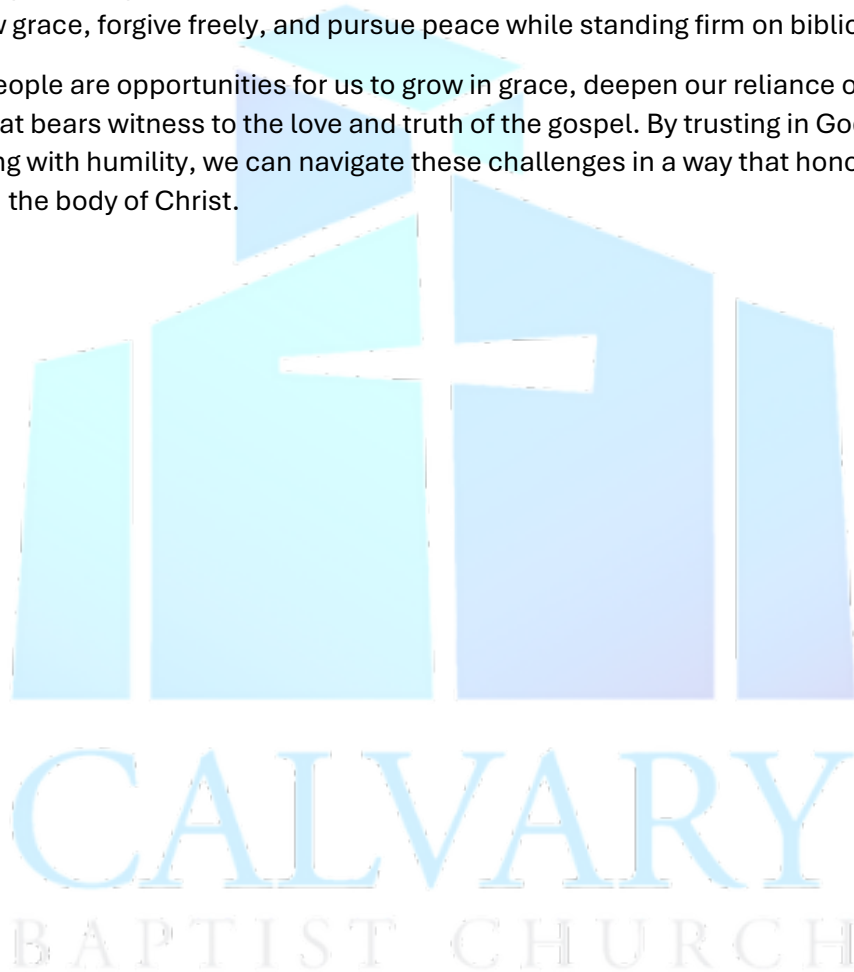
### **Remember the Holy Spirit's Power to Change Hearts**

While it can be tempting to think that we must solve difficult relationships on our own, we must remember that true heart change is the work of the Holy Spirit. Ezekiel 36:26 reminds us that God is the one who transforms hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. Trust that God can work in the lives of even the most challenging people and pray for His transformative power to work in their hearts.

### **Reflect Christ in All Interactions**

When dealing with difficult people in the church, our ultimate aim should be to reflect Christ. Jesus Himself dealt with difficult individuals—with His own disciples, the Pharisees, and even those who sought to kill Him. Yet, He displayed compassion, patience, and a relentless commitment to truth. As we follow His example, we too are called to show grace, forgive freely, and pursue peace while standing firm on biblical principles.

Ultimately, difficult people are opportunities for us to grow in grace, deepen our reliance on Christ, and build a church community that bears witness to the love and truth of the gospel. By trusting in God's wisdom, walking in love, and responding with humility, we can navigate these challenges in a way that honors Him and promotes unity within the body of Christ.



# Am I the Difficult Person? A Call to Self-Examination and Growth in Christ

At some point, every Christian faces the challenge of dealing with difficult people within the church. But, perhaps one of the hardest questions we must ask ourselves is: *Could I be the difficult person?* This question requires humility, self-awareness, and a commitment to honoring Christ in all our relationships. Scripture continually calls us to examine our hearts and motivations, and to grow in holiness and love toward others. In this article, we'll walk through a biblical approach to self-examination, identify common ways we might be difficult, and consider how we can take proactive steps to foster unity and peace within the body of Christ.

## 1. Start with a Heart of Humility

### The Importance of Humility in Self-Examination

The starting point for this journey is humility. Pride blinds us to our own faults, and it's often the root of much difficulty in relationships. James 4:6 warns, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." If we approach self-examination with pride or defensiveness, we'll fail to see ourselves as we truly are. Only with humility can we take an honest look at our behaviors and attitudes.

In Matthew 7:3-5, Jesus asks us to "take the log out of [our] own eye" before addressing the "speck" in someone else's. He emphasizes self-examination as a prerequisite to helping others, reminding us that if we overlook our own shortcomings, we are ill-equipped to lovingly address anyone else's. True humility recognizes that we, too, are sinners in need of grace.

## 2. Ask Key Questions for Self-Examination

Below are some heart-probing questions grounded in Scripture. By reflecting on these questions, we can discern whether we might be acting as a difficult person in the church and discover areas that need transformation.

### a. Am I Quick to Take Offense?

*Proverbs 19:11* says, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense." If we find ourselves constantly offended, it may be that we're expecting others to treat us perfectly or fulfill all our needs. This expectation can lead to resentment and create division within the church.

### b. Do I Frequently Criticize or Complain?

Philippians 2:14-15 instructs, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation." A habit of criticism and complaint not only strains relationships but also fosters an ungrateful heart. Self-examination might reveal that we need to cultivate gratitude instead of looking for reasons to criticize.

### c. Am I Defensive or Resistant to Correction?

One mark of a difficult person is defensiveness. *Proverbs 12:1* tells us, "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid." A heart unwilling to accept correction reveals pride and a lack of teachability. If we notice ourselves feeling defensive when corrected or refusing advice, we may be contributing to division and undermining opportunities for growth in Christ.

### d. Do I Seek to Control or Manipulate Others?

Some difficult people try to impose their preferences or agenda on others. James 3:16 warns, "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice." Manipulation, jealousy, and selfishness breed tension and conflict. Instead of seeking to control others, Scripture calls us to "count others more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

### e. Am I a Source of Gossip or Division?

Gossip and division are significant marks of difficulty in relationships. Proverbs 16:28 warns, “A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.” If we find ourselves talking about others in ways that cause hurt or division, we may be damaging the unity of the church. God calls us to be peacemakers, not sowers of discord.

### 3. Recognize the Consequences of Being a Difficult Person

#### **Strained Relationships and Lost Trust**

When we are difficult, we can damage relationships and lose the trust of those around us. Proverbs 18:19 says, “A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle.” Once trust is broken, it can be difficult to repair, and it often takes time and intentional effort to restore what has been lost.

#### **Hindrance to the Church’s Mission**

Difficult behavior can hinder the church’s mission to make disciples and reflect Christ’s love to the world. Jesus says in John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” When members are difficult, they create division, distract from ministry, and prevent the church from being a faithful witness of Christ’s love.

#### **Loss of Personal Peace and Joy**

Difficult behavior disrupts our peace and joy as well. Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruit of the Spirit, which includes peace, patience, kindness, and gentleness. A critical or divisive attitude conflicts with these qualities, preventing us from experiencing the full joy of life in Christ. Difficult behavior often stems from unresolved heart issues, such as pride, insecurity, or bitterness, that rob us of peace and contentment.

### 4. Cultivate Attitudes and Actions that Promote Unity

Once we’ve identified areas for growth, we can take intentional steps to change. Scripture provides a clear roadmap for cultivating healthy, Christ-like relationships.

#### **a. Pursue Love and Humility**

First Corinthians 13 is our model for love: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude” (vv. 4-5). If we strive to love as Christ loves, our relationships will be transformed. We must “clothe [ourselves] with humility” (1 Peter 5:5), remembering that we too are recipients of God’s undeserved grace.

#### **b. Practice Gratitude and Encourage Others**

Instead of focusing on others’ shortcomings, practice gratitude and look for ways to encourage. Hebrews 10:24 says, “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” Rather than allowing critical thoughts to take root, look for opportunities to affirm others and express gratitude for their contributions to the body.

#### **c. Seek and Welcome Accountability**

Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.” True friends help us grow in holiness, even when it’s uncomfortable. Seek out accountability from trusted believers who will speak truth to you in love. Open your heart to correction, recognizing that God often uses others to help us see and address our blind spots.

#### **d. Resolve Conflicts Biblically and Swiftly**

When conflicts do arise, address them promptly and biblically. Ephesians 4:26 reminds us, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Matthew 18:15 instructs us to go directly to the person involved and seek



reconciliation, rather than allowing resentment to build. When we address issues openly and humbly, we can avoid misunderstandings and preserve unity.

#### **e. Pray for a Heart Transformed by the Spirit**

Finally, our own strength and wisdom are insufficient for lasting change. We need the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts to help us grow in Christ-likeness. Galatians 5:16 calls us to “walk by the Spirit” so that we do not gratify the desires of the flesh. Pray that God will shape your heart, convict you of sin, and empower you to pursue holiness and love.

## **5. Embrace the Joy of Living in Unity and Peace**

Psalms 133:1 declares, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” When we are intentional about fostering peace, love, and humility, we contribute to a joyful and harmonious church environment. This not only pleases God but also strengthens the witness of the church. Ephesians 4:3 calls us to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The peace of the church ultimately glorifies God and benefits each member of the body. When we lay down our own preferences and choose to live in love and humility, we become instruments of God’s grace and reflect His heart to a watching world.

#### **The Call to Reflect Christ**

Being difficult, divisive, or critical has serious consequences, not only for ourselves but also for the entire church body. However, God calls us to a higher standard of love, humility, and unity in Christ. As we commit ourselves to regular self-examination, repentance, and intentional growth, we can become the opposite of difficult people. Instead, we become vessels of God’s love and grace, contributing to the flourishing of His church.

So, let us ask ourselves: *Am I the difficult person?* And if we find that we may be, let us humbly ask God for the grace to change, seeking to be more like Christ and less like ourselves, for His glory and the unity of His church.



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