



# Loving Difficult People Ephesians

## 5:1-2

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Let's be honest, some people are hard to love. Unfortunately, from the stories I hear, it is often a spouse.

I recently had a wife tell me that being in bed with her husband was like being in bed with sandpaper. Why would ANYONE want to be close to a person like sandpaper!

Your difficult person may not be a spouse; he could be an extended family member or even someone in your church who just “rubs you the wrong way.”

## A Model to Follow

As we live our lives, the realities of our fallen world are realized in our difficult relationships. Scripture is realistic about this. In particular, as Paul writes, he applies

biblical teaching to this very subject. In Ephesians 5, he writes, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (vv. 1-2). Who are the “us” that Christ loved? Certainly not very loveable people (see 4:17-19)!

In these verses, our Lord dying on the cross for difficult people is being done as an act of worship to the Father. We have a humbling model to follow.

## Identifying the Difficult People

Paul is writing to people in what must have been a tense situation. Roman citizens and Jews who had become converts were now in the same church in a Roman Colony named Ephesus (See 2:12-18). Can you imagine the potential for conflict?

If you grew up in a Roman home, you would have been taught to think of Jews as rabble-rousers. Jewish children were taught to think of the Romans as oppressors who were suppressing the liberties of Jews. Now they are in church together! Paul is deeply concerned that they learn how to get along in Christ (4:1-3).

Paul believed that the ground at the cross is level, and the gospel of grace and mercy makes relationships work... even with difficult people!

Maybe you married a person from a different cultural background or that person you are having a hard time loving in your church just doesn't see things your way because of his family or church upbringing.

My wife and I come from very distinct backgrounds. My family is deeply rooted in American history. Two branches of my family have been in the country for almost 400 years and another almost 300!

My wife's family, though, on both her mother and father's side, has been in the U.S. since the early 1900s and comes from a Slavic origin with all the ethnicity that comes with that (including special Christmas cookies from Czechoslovakia)! There were some rubs early in our marriage, especially with my mother-in-law. I wasn't like them, and I wasn't from their area.

In addition to the background of Ephesians, it is clear in the book itself who these difficult people are. The people our Lord died for, “Lived in the passions of ... flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (2:3). I counsel people who live

carrying out the desires of their bodies and minds. These are not nice people to be around (see also 4:17-19)!

If we are going to love difficult people who are like this, we will need some deep motivation.

## **Motives for Following the Model**

I am reminded of how important having a deeper motivation for loving difficult people is when I remember a specific counselee. I had asked a wife to show love to her husband in specific ways throughout the week. She said, “I don’t love him, and you wouldn’t want me to be a hypocrite, would you? If I show him love, but I don’t feel it, I would be a hypocrite.” What would you say?

My response was to ask her if she could love him as an act of love for her Lord in appreciation for the grace she had received in Christ. You see, as people overwhelmed by grace, we give grace and forgiveness (see Matt. 18:33-35). How much are you moved by the grace you have received?

The bigger my sin looks to me, the smaller other’s sins against me look in comparison.

This reminds me of a quote supposedly from Benjamin Franklin. He said, “Before marriage, keep your eyes wide open. But, after marriage, keep them half-closed!” Why should I have a great degree of toleration for my wife and others? Because I remember how much God, in Christ, tolerates me (see 4:2).

### *As Beloved Children*

Paul gives some motivations right in the verses. First, if we are part of God’s family, there ought to be family characteristics. According to Ephesians, we have been adopted into God’s family (1:5). There should be a family resemblance, so Paul says to be imitators of God as beloved children.

It may feel impossible to love this person who is like sandpaper. However, it is not. Because of the gospel, we are capable of supernatural acts of love and should be motivated to do so if we are truly in the family (see 3:20-21).

## *As a Fragrant Offering and Sacrifice*

Here is another motivation—the strongest, in my opinion. As our Lord hung on the cross, His sacrifice was a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. “Offering and sacrifice” is Old Testament worship language. In other words, Jesus is the sacrificial lamb who gave Himself for our wretchedness as an act of worship. He is asking us to do the same for the wretch in our lives.

Be encouraged! God considers it an act of worship to Him each time we choose to love a difficult person like Christ did while hanging on the cross.

If you can't love the person because of your affection for him, can you love out of your affectionate worship for the Lord?

## **Some Practical Ideas and Perspective**

Perhaps you are seeing the need to love the difficult person in your life, so here are some ideas for how to do it.

Consider reading Matthew's account of the crucifixion in chapter 27 daily for a few weeks, and ask the Lord to melt your heart by what your Savior did for you on the cross.

List your five worst sins (maybe no one else knows about them) and thank the Lord for forgiving you (if you have asked for forgiveness). Then, ask yourself what it would be like for you if God treated you the way you are treating the difficult person in your life (see Matt. 7:12).

One last thought: you are probably the difficult person to someone else.

## **Questions for Reflection**

1. What are some acts of love you could show the difficult person in your life in fulfillment of these verses and Matthew 5:44-45?
2. What are some other passages of Scripture that tell us to love difficult people?