

LIMITED LIABILITIES

Loving People Thoroughly Love People (Part 6)

We've been in a series on loving people...where Dan Meyer and also Tracy Bianchi have shined a spotlight on the essential responsibility of a Christian...to love other people. Today I want to wrap up this series by moving the spotlight to shine on the kinds of people that most of us have the most difficulty loving. Dan has talked about loving people who are difficult, different, dangerous, or dumb. If those kinds of people are in our own personal orbits -- and for most of us that's true, though we may fail to notice -- the question becomes how do we love them? What's the role of the Church on behalf of such people? What do we do as the family of God to come alongside them without taking on more individually than any of us can really do? Those are some of the questions we want to wrestle with this morning.

In Dan's message last week, he used the text from James 2:1, "Brothers and sisters, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism." I heard that last week and thought of one word. Ouch. I've done that frequently. I've shown favoritism to other people. I've played favorites. I like having around me the people for me who are easy to be around. We like to be with people we like. We like to be with friends and people who don't come with a lot of liabilities. Life's hard enough without their burdens, too, after all. We naturally act cautiously about investing time and emotional energy in people who seemingly have little return for us. When we examine the thoroughness of our love for others, most of us, in fact, come up short. I know I gravitate to low-maintenance people. Some years ago there was a book that was popular in Christian circles. It was called "Boundaries." It was a good book and it served a very useful purpose in helping Christians not develop co-dependencies with people whose problems were overwhelming or couldn't really be helped. Clearly, that can be an issue. And a book like that has a purpose. But we can boundary ourselves completely out of contact with people who need to be loved. Loving people is not about getting into unhealthy attachments. It's simply about loving them. Though it isn't easy, it can be done in a healthy way. And that's been the point of this whole series.

A few years ago, I heard a very effective sermon on the subject by Gordon McDonald. Essentially, his message was this: there are two distinct groups of people that we can encounter in our lives. To put it simply, there are the plus people. They add to our lives. They're easy to deal with. They encourage us. They make us smile, even laugh. They're the fun people for us. We like hanging out with those folks. Whether they're relatives, neighbors or co-workers, they

help our lives in some way. Then there are the minus people. For whatever reason or reasons, they drain us. Many of these people are just fine. Somehow they just don't connect to us. But some of these people are really not just fine. They're wounded and they frequently send out signals intentionally or unintentionally that they hurt. These are what McDonald went on to call EGRs, "Extra Grace Required" people. You know some, perhaps. They're difficult to deal with for a whole host of reasons. Some EGRs suffer from mental illness. Some are dealing with physical diseases that for at least a season leave them unable to manage relationships with the same balance they used to have. Some Extra Grace Required people will get better and some EGRs frankly, are unlikely to get better. Nevertheless, they are all still people to be loved. Perhaps a couple of examples can help describe the challenge of loving such people. Amy Simpson, a wonderful writer with Leadership magazine has thoughtfully written about ministry to difficult people. When she was only a young teen, Amy's mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia. At awkward moments, her mother would say odd things or become catatonic even. And this would happen on occasion in public places or around Amy's friends. Amy was naturally embarrassed and even afraid. Yet she felt the obligation to love and to care for her mother. It's hard, though, being young and taking on adult responsibilities but she tried. When families deal with mental illness, it becomes a whole new world of navigating the health system. Wrestling with the feelings of guilt that you haven't done enough and yet you're exhausted by what you have done. Amy put her struggle this way, "Hearing other teenage girls complain about fights with their moms, I could only wish I could fight with my mom because that would seem so normal." Laurie and I have found Christ Church to be an unusually loving fellowship. But all churches struggle with how we minister to difficult and different people. One answer is to leave it to the professionals and assign someone to do pastoral care to the extra-needy people, the EGRs in the Church. But surely, we can't outsource all Christian caring to someone else in the family of God.

I have my own personal story of wondering how the Church could love better. I grew up on a small ranch in Oklahoma, the son of a man who really and truly could have been the Marlboro man. He was tough. He wore jeans. He rode and trained horses. He chased cattle. Yes, he also smoked. He looked like the guy in the Marlboro ads, if some of you remember it. I would have shown you the picture but it somehow didn't seem churchly enough.

My dad was all of those things but he was also a Christian. He was an elder in our small town church. He was a good man. He was also a man you didn't want to mess with. I know. I tried. Only a few times. On cattle roundups, the steers were afraid of him.

Sadly, when my dad was only in his late 30s, this tough, physical, strong man began to develop a tremor in his hands. Like a lot of men, he didn't like doctors and he thought he didn't need them. Eventually, he succumbed to the inevitable need to find out what was wrong and through his doctor found a neurologist who told him he had Parkinson's disease. I was young. But I remember how Dad's relationship with the Church changed after he became ill. First, to be honest, he was angry at God. That part was certainly on him and it was understandable. But that and his general nature didn't make him a highly approachable person. But the other part of it was his participation in the church community changed. In worship, I remember how he bravely tried to hold the hymnal still while he was singing and he couldn't do it. His hands trembled and the book trembled with them. I recall his sense of embarrassment and could tell that other people in the church were sad for him. Dad was a new entry in the field of people for whom Extra Grace was required. I still remember those who reached out in love to my parents. I also remember that many, not knowing what to do, drifted away. How are we supposed to love people? The question becomes how do we do it well? Especially when the circumstances are difficult? I assume that if God intends for us to love people, even people in great difficulty or who are difficult people, He will show us the way to do that. For one example of this, I'd like you to turn in your bibles to Mark 1:40. These words in your bibles in front of you or the ones you brought or on the screen are profound and wonderful words on the how question of how we're called to love people. What can we do? What can we learn from Jesus about how we approach and love other people? From Mark 1:40-45: "A man with leprosy came to Him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing --'" In your mind, for a moment, parenthetically, underscore the word "willing." "If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' He said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 'See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing as a testimony to them.' Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere." This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Jesus had been on a healing spree. What Mark has done in this, the shortest of the Gospels -- the one that gets at the heart of things quickly -- Mark has shown Jesus' authority over diseases and demons. And as Jesus did the work of restoring people, even though He risked the ire of the religious authorities by performing miracles and especially on the Sabbath, Mark wants us to understand this is the dawning of the Kingdom of God in its fullness. Jesus preached, performed miracles and exorcisms and in doing so, was announcing in no uncertain terms the Kingdom of God is indeed near. So when we get to verse 40, there is a remarkable healing of this leper. The whole encounter shouldn't have happened. The law made clear that lepers were unclean and whoever touched

them were also made unclean. Leprosy, at the time, was considered highly contagious. Medical science knows today that really wasn't and isn't the case. But that's how it was viewed then. Those who had leprosy were confined to the fringes of life, usually living in garbage dumps where they could live off the scraps of food and clothing that others discarded. By the first century, lepers were required to wear bells around their neck to warn of their presence. If someone approached them, they were required by law to shout out the words, "Unclean! Unclean!" So people could flee from their presence. The worst part of a leper's misery, as if all of that weren't enough, was that they were totally cut off from their families and their communities of faith, completely cut off. When they most needed extra grace, they were deprived of its sources. They couldn't go to the synagogue. They couldn't offer sacrifices. No one could possibly have been any more estranged from people than the pitiful man who, on his knees, cried out to Jesus saying, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Note again the word, "willing." He'd heard the stories. Jesus' reputation went before Him. He knew Jesus was capable of healing him. But would He possibly be willing to heal one as desperate as this leper? And that's what's racing through the leper's mind. For a person with a self-image less than zero, he was asking the simple question, "I know you can, but will you?" We know the end of the story. Jesus healed the man. Let's unpack the process and see what we can learn as we seek to learn about how we can effectively love others. The first thing we're called to do, to love the difficult, different, seemingly dangerous people we encounter is to see them as Jesus saw them. Jesus saw not only his condition, but He also saw the posture of this desperate man. Jesus had reasons to move on. The restoration of a man like this was the responsibility of the temple priests. The priests and only the priests were the ones that could declare someone clean according to the stipulations and the ritual of the law. Jesus wasn't an official priest. He had no particular standing in the temple. This healing made a very powerful statement. But it was interpreted by the religious authorities that Jesus had placed Himself above the law and, in fact, Jesus had placed Himself above the law. He saw the man, saw his posture and his pain, and He acted. We, too, need to train ourselves to see the people around us as they really are. The second thing we're called to do when we encounter a person who needs to be loved, is to hear as Jesus heard. When you get to the heart of this encounter, when you really think about the story, you have to believe that Jesus was moved by the cry in the man's voice. The sound of the bell around his neck. The abject humility in his words. People send signals when they're hurting. These were hard to miss. Jesus, though, heard the cry when He could have walked away. Listening is a skill to be cultivated. If we learn to listen, people will tell us what they need. The third reality of this encounter is that we're called to feel as Jesus felt. Verse 41 says Jesus, on the encounter with the man, was filled with compassion. The Greek word describing that sentence there, "filled with compassion," is literally a word used to describe in the ancient world as, "That which gives you a bad stomach ache." So to put it in the vernacular, Jesus' guts

ached over the pain of this man. It's actually pretty easy to imagine Jesus feeling that way but how hard that was for Him. Another solid translation of that verse puts it this way, "Jesus was indignant." It's also pretty easy to understand how Jesus would be indignant about having to see a man and to listen to his pain, to see a bell around his neck, his emaciated frame, the grief in his eyes. It's easy enough to think about the indignation rising up in Jesus that any human being in that condition would be treated so despicably. We're obviously not Jesus but we have probably reached a really good place as a follower of Jesus when, like Him, we allow ourselves to experience some of the pain that others feel. Giving extra grace requires the motivation that comes from a God-given sense of caring. The next thing Jesus did in this account, to no surprise, was to do something about the situation. He saw the man's need. He heard the cry of his broken heart. Jesus was deeply moved emotionally by the leper's plight and then He did something about it. He reached out His hand and in a beautiful response to the man's beginning plea, Jesus responded with the words, "I am willing. Be clean." We're called to do as Jesus did. I should point out that this wasn't without cost. After asking the man to go to the priest and get the healing certified, the man, in his exuberance, instead began in the words of the text to talk freely spreading the news. I think Mark is engaging in some wonderfully understated statements there. The man went around jumping and screaming, shouting out his hallelujahs. I mean, he's one happy, shocked man. So this man is shouting from the rooftops what had happened to him and we're left just to wonder. Mark doesn't answer all of our questions. Did any scars remain? What did he do with that stupid bell around his neck? Were people still afraid to hug him? Did they still avoid him? Mark leaves his tantalizing questions but he tells us all we need to know. One thing we do know. This healing costs Jesus something. The healing was so spectacular that He could no longer go into a town without being recognized. His privacy was gone. His moments of quiet. His doubtless continuous conversations with the Father were now constantly interrupted. Even with appropriate boundaries, and by the way, remember Jesus did occasionally back away from need. Even with appropriate boundaries loving hurting people can be costly. We should be honest about the potential price. There is one other ironic cost Jesus paid for healing the leper. Jesus was now officially Himself ceremonially unclean. That was the common assumption. And we still, for obvious reasons, think that way. It's common sense to think that when something clean touches something dirty, the clean item also becomes dirty. That's why we don't take a towel with which we've washed our car and bring it in to dry the dishes. But rules were overturned in this story. When Jesus touched the leper, the leper became clean. Maybe for the first time in history someone who was clean touched someone who was unclean and both came away clean. God has a way of resetting the rules. Well, what do we do with all of this? We could talk more about it. And in the future I'm sure we will. The Church can never stop talking about the imperative to love people. No matter what else we do, we're called to love others, especially those for whom extra grace is required.

Paul tells us in the well-known passage of 1 Corinthians 13, that if we don't love people, nothing else we do matters. If we don't love people, we're just going through life making noise. James asked the hard question when he wrote, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?" The answer is it's not very much good. I want to leave you with an image of a well-known religious symbol. There it is.

That's the Nike "swoosh." Okay, so it's not a well-known religious symbol. It's just a well-known symbol. We'll make it have religious meaning here. A long time ago, Nike, which was initially interested in just making running shoes, figured out if people bought the running shoes but then went home and put them in the closet and didn't use them, they didn't run, Nike would never sell them the next pair of shoes because they had worn out the first one. So, not only did they develop this swoosh emblem, they realized that if shoes left in the closet were of no benefit to Nike, they were going to have to inform consumers that they needed to do something with the shoes. So they added a phrase with the swoosh: "Just do it." That's where we are at the end of this series on loving people. We can take all of this and we can sort of put it in the closet in the back of our minds. We can just sort of leave it there because this is something that's pretty challenging...particularly to love difficult people. The EGRs. The people who need God's extra grace. I've been in places and times in my life and it'll probably happen again, I know it will, when I'll do the very same thing. But the question for me and the question for all of us is will we reach out in genuine love to the people in our lives that are difficult? Will we reach out to the contrary neighbor? The difficult relative we've only been tolerating? The friend who's become an EGR and we didn't expect that and we hadn't planned for it? Can we act with generous intentions on behalf of those that Jesus called the lost, the last, the least, the people who struggle? Can we love those people, too? And can we go as far as possible and personally embrace the perplexing people, the prodigals? Those people who intersect with us, can we love them in boldly loving ways? If we love like Jesus, if we see them for who they are, if we hear the cry of their heart, if we feel their hurt and then if we act, then yes, the answer is we can do this and we must do this. This is God's call on the Church and this is God's call on God's people. May He give us the grace we need to minister those who need grace. Let's pray. Lord God, for Your goodness, for the very reality that everyone in this place has experienced Your grace, and were it not for that grace, oh Lord, where would we be? We thank you for that and pray that as we treasure the grace we've been given, we might share that grace with others in new and hopeful ways that we might be wonderfully surprised by what you do in the lives of other people. Lord God, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.