

Question: I hate conflict, but it seems almost impossible to avoid conflict with difficult people. What would Jesus do?

From the moment Satan deceived Adam and Eve, he has been determined to set us against one another, as well as against God. As a result, we live in a world continuously caught up in conflict, bitter strife and war. But blaming the evil one does not help deal with our conflicts, especially problems with difficult people.

Few people enjoy heated arguments and angry confrontations. Most of us would rather find a less stressful way of dealing with any differences we may have with one another. We would rather avoid shortening our lives by high blood pressure, strokes, heart attacks, stomach ulcers or other stress-related illnesses. I believe Jesus would propose some alternative ways of dealing with difficult people in order to avoid these risks.

For example, Jesus taught his disciples a procedure to follow when fellow-disciples had sinned against them. He said, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17). In the book of Acts, we read about a Christian couple, Pricilla and Aquila, who followed these principles when they heard Apollos boldly preaching an inaccurate message. We are told that “they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:26). However, this process was intended for those who shared a common faith in Jesus. We have no guarantee it will work with those who do not have this common faith, but it may be worth a try.

There are other times, even among Christians, when nothing less than a public confrontation may be necessary. When the apostle Peter was in Antioch of Syria, his actions before the church were hypocritical and misled others into the same hypocrisy. Because of Peter’s actions, Paul opposed him to his face in front of them all (Galatians 2:11-14). While this may seem unnecessarily harsh, the sin of Peter was not only public but also endangered the understanding of the truth of God within the church at Antioch. Paul did not do an exposé of

Peter at another church: he confronted Peter face-to-face about the problem. At the same time, keep in mind that Paul always admonished Christians to act gently and in love, even when correcting one another (Galatians 6:1; cf. 1 Corinthians 13).

Sometimes our differences with another person are not worth the conflict that might be created by trying to deal with them. In those times, we need to allow the forgiving grace of God to fill our hearts. The wise man of the Proverbs said, “He who covers over an offense promotes love” (Proverbs 17:9). Just as Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified him (Luke 23:34), Christians are told to “bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13).

The only way left to deal with some difficult people may be simply to avoid them as much as possible and to keep moving forward with your life. Hopefully, some effort has been made to resolve the difficulties; but with some personalities, there is no way to avoid a stressful battle except to stay away from them. The Proverbs admonish, “It is to a man's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel” (Proverbs 20:3). Thus, we are also encouraged not to make friends with a hot-tempered man (Proverbs 22:24) and to avoid traveling with wicked men (Proverbs 4:14-16). We need to stay away from some people.

Jesus did not give us laws or rules to follow to prevent problems with difficult people, but the above teachings do provide alternative ways and principles that can help us. God bless your desire to live in peace with all people (Romans 12:18ff).

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