

## Choosing to Love a Difficult Co-Worker

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Rich Nathan

May 4-5, 2002

Work: Christians in the Workplace

Romans 12:14-21

When I was in college, I had a job briefly in the college transcript office with a co-worker who just didn't like me. I would listen to one radio station in the office, and she would come in and, without asking, change the station. I would try to engage her in a conversation, "How are you doing? How is your day?" And she would just walk away or clam up. No matter what I said, she would either take the exact opposite viewpoint or just roll her eyes and sigh.

The dispute between us became so petty that, at one point she demanded that I not use any of the pens from her side of the desk. She claimed a side of the one desk that was in this little office, and I needed to have my pens, which were all office supplied, in the other side of the desk. She was, for me, a difficult person. It was challenging to go to work every day and not dread encountering her.

### **PHOTO OF CRUELLA DEVILLE ON THE OVERHEAD.**

I would like you for a moment to conjure up someone in your workplace who, for you, is a difficult person. Perhaps you are getting along wonderfully with everyone right now. Perhaps there was a difficult person for you in a former job. And, of course, difficult people come to us in every shape and size. You have the occasionally annoying – the person you don't have that much contact with, but when you do, it is somewhat irritating. Perhaps they are chatterboxes, or they stand too close, or they have a really, really negative attitude, so that when you see them coming, it is like the old Charlie Brown cartoons of Pigpen. There is this cloud around them; only it is a cloud of pessimism and gloom.

There are difficult people in every sphere of life. There are annoying neighbors who just let their dogs go on your lawn without cleaning up the mess, people whom you might go to school with who don't do their share on group projects, folks in your workplace who never seem to have the right change when you are going to split the bill at lunch, or individuals who smoke cigarettes in your closed car in the winter without first asking you, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

In every sphere of life, there are difficult people. There are, of course, folks at the other end of the spectrum – folks who have really hurt us. They are not merely annoying or irritating. They could be ex-spouses with whom you have to wrestle constantly over the care of your children, or child support payments. Perhaps there is someone in the church who, you feel, has repeatedly sinned against you.

Of course, the classically difficult person for many individuals in America is someone in our own families – your own parents or in-laws. You may have a mother who is impossible to please. Nothing you do is ever good enough. There are mothers whose leading edge is guilt. “Why don’t you call me?” “Why don’t you write?” Or mothers who never say anything and smile at you when you know there is something wrong. “Mom, I know that you are hurt.” “No, darling, everything is okay.”

There are dads who are bullies, or who are radically insensitive, who say cruel and mean things. Perhaps you grew up in a home with an alcoholic mother or father who was abusive

Difficult people can be in our families. You may live with a difficult person – someone who is self-centered, non-communicative, and angry.

I’ve been doing a series on work. And so I’m going to focus most of my remarks today on relating to difficult people in the workplace. But what I’m communicating has relevance to our relationships with difficult people whether you are working at home raising a family, or you are in school, or you are thinking about a difficult person in your woman’s group, or your home fellowship group, or in the church, or in your neighborhood. We Christians are not asked to merely cope with difficult people, to learn how to schmooze them, to get around them. We Christians are not asked to merely get along with difficult people.

If we really want to take the Bible for all it’s worth, we really would see the message in the scripture that we are called upon to love the difficult people that God has allowed to be in our lives. Love. Not just tolerate. Not just cope with. Not just conveniently avoid.

I’ve called today’s talk, “Choosing to Love a Difficult Co-Worker.” Let’s pray.

Romans 12:14-21 – *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Just to give you a little background to this text, I believe verses 9-13 concern our relationships with each other in the church – the relationship of one Christian with another Christian. So we read in verse 10, for example, *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.* One Christian brother to another; one Christian sister to another Christian sister. In verse 13 we see again that it is contextualized to our relationships in the church where the apostle Paul says, *Share with God’s people who are in need.*

He's talking about the church. He's not talking about relationships with everyone in the world.

But he switches gears in verse 14 very plainly and talks about the Christian's relationship with the larger society, with your co-workers in the workplace, when he says, *Bless those who persecute you*. He's not talking here about the church persecuting you. He's talking about your relationships in the world.

Now, we see that there is a major change in verse 14. The apostle Paul says: *Bless those who persecute you*. He's not thinking of persecution from the church. But he's thinking about persecution from the larger society. Likewise, when he talks about taking revenge: *Leave room for God's wrath*, he's not thinking about God's wrath on a fellow Christian brother or sister, but judgment that would fall on someone who is outside of the church.

And before we look at this section, verses 14-21, in detail, I want to offer you a couple of thoughts about how to read this text. The commands we read there, in Verses 14-21, are only for Christians. And they make sense, only if you are a Christian, if you are a follower of Christ. In fact, if you want a test regarding whether you are a real Christian and not just a church-goer, you can ask yourself as we go through this, "Am I willing to obey all of these commands with every difficult person in my life?"

See, the commandments we are about to read are not just bits of practical wisdom that will work whether you have faith in God or not, or whether you are a follower of Christ or not. This isn't some self-help book that anyone can pull off the rack in some bookstore. Things in this passage can be worked out for you only if the Spirit of God provides you with the power to do these challenging things.

If you look back at verse 11, Paul writes: *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord*. Literally, when the apostle Paul says, "Keep your spiritual fervor, he is saying, "I want you to boil over with the Holy Spirit."

#### **PROJECTIONIST: SHOW SLIDE OF A BOILING POT**

With respect to the Spirit, boil over. See, you can't be a lukewarm Christian, sometimes Christian, an occasional dabbler, and do verses 14-21. You've got to be white hot, really alive in God, really in touch with him, with no major obstacles between you and him. The Spirit of God has to provide you with the power to do this. This stuff will work only if you are a real Christian.

Another way to think about this is if you've never experienced God himself forgiving you after you've really offended him, if Jesus being nailed to a cross for your sins is just an abstract concept for you, but it's not a living reality, it's not something that softens you up inside, but it's just some religious concept, then you are going to look at what the apostle Paul says in verses 14-21 of Romans 12 and say, "Forget it. I'm never going to do these things. No way. Not after what this person has done. You don't understand what it's like to work with them, what their attitude is like, how difficult they are. You

don't understand what it feels like from my perspective. I don't deserve this kind of treatment."

What I'm saying is that these commands can only be obeyed if you are boiling over with the Holy Spirit and you personally know what it feels like to be forgiven by God. That's the starting point - you recognizing that you've done a whole list of things to offend God, that you've run up a bill way too large for you to pay, but that God in his mercy offers his Son as the full payment for your offenses and your sins, and my offenses and my sins.

These commands are only for Christians. And the second thing that you need to hear, before we actually look at the individual commands, is that these commands are addressed to our wills. I'm not saying that we can do this without God's help, without the Spirit's power. But you cannot just drift into a repaired relationship with a difficult person unless you make some clear choices to obey God along the way. If you've got a strained relationship with another person, you are not going to have that relationship healed unless you make very clear choices along the way. Every one of these commands presents us squarely with a choice: will you choose to do this, or will you refuse? Will you obey this, or will you come up with a whole list of excuses why you don't have to, why your situation is different, why this person is so horrible, why you are the exception to the rule.

The way that I read the list that Paul lays out in Romans 12:14-21 is that I need to say, "Father, by your grace, with your Spirit's help, I choose to pray. Father, by your grace, with your Spirit's help, I choose to forgive. Father, by your grace and your Spirit's help, I choose to seek peace."

The list is for Christians, and this list involves choices. Let me give you an image that I'm going to use throughout this talk.

### **PROJECTIONIST: SHOW THE SLIDE OF THE STEEPLECHASE**

That is a picture of running a steeplechase. I don't know how many of you are familiar with the steeplechase race. It was invented in England, where I guess, because of the unhappy weather conditions and rather miserable cuisine, the English decided to spread the misery the racing with horses and with individuals.

The race is 7.5 laps around a 400 meter track – about a 2-mile race – and every time around you have five log hurdles that are 3' high. Four of the hurdles are on level ground, but the 5<sup>th</sup> is in front of a water trap. So you jump over this 3' hurdle into this water pit that starts off 2.5' deep. It slopes back up, so you are leaping down into water that goes up to your thighs. And you are running in that for 12' and then you run out of the pit seven times around the track.

Now, the steeplechase race is what it's like to really learn to love a difficult person at your work or in your life. There are all kinds of traps and obstacles along the way. Steeplechase runners are just punished. You have to choose to engage in this race.

You hit that water and your legs are cold and wet. You lose feeling in them. At the end of the water hole, you are running uphill. Runners collapse with exhaustion. Over and over again they have to jump over the same hurdle. They don't just hit the hurdle once, and that's it. The same hurdle comes back up over and over.

That's what it's like with a difficult person. "I thought we resolved this, and here it is again." And then you go around the lap, and here it is again. And then you go around the lap, and here it is again. And again, again, and again – seven times over. It's brutal.

So, where do we begin? Again, dial up in your mind the one person at work that you find difficult, or perhaps you may want to apply this to a roommate, someone in your family, someone in your class. Where do we begin?

Choosing to love a difficult person begins with prayer. Verse 14: *Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse.* Choose to pray for this difficult person. The Bible tells us that, when we are to bless another person, the Greek word is "eulogeo". It's where we get the English word "eulogy". A eulogy in a funeral service is a time when we remember the person deceased, and we speak well of them. A eulogy is not the time to point out that individual's many faults, to remind the audience of the person's many sins; rather, we take a little time to remember the good that that person did.

At the very least, when the Bible commands us to bless and not curse someone, it means that we stop running them down when we talk to other people. It means that I choose to stop gossiping about this difficult person because my gossip just increases my angry feelings. It means that you stop cursing them under your breath, or rolling your eyes when you are around them. Instead, you bless. Where do you start this steeplechase race? You choose to pray for them.

### **PROJECTIONIST: SHOW THE PICTURE OF MOTHER TERESA PRAYING**

To bless is to ask God to bless that person. Not to bless the wrong things they're doing. Not to bless them in their sin. But to bless them perhaps by bringing them into a personal relationship with Christ. To bless them by bringing them to a place of softness and repentance. That's blessing. "Father, forgive them. Father, heal them." Not "Father burn their house down, and blow up their car." Jesus rebuked his disciples who wanted to pray fire down on some Samaritans. Instead, we choose to bless.

When you kneel down and you pray for another individual, you are opening the door for God to heal your relationship. If you refuse to pray, you are slamming the door in God's face. When you kneel down and you bring another person before God, do that not just once, but I challenge you to get on your knees once a day for that difficult person in your life, once a day for two to three weeks, and pray for them. Pray for God's blessing upon them. I guarantee you; you are going to have an entirely different view of that person.

Stop talking to other people about the difficult person in your life. Start talking to God. Again, you don't start the steeplechase race by feeling loving feelings toward them, by feeling positively inclined. You may be angry. You may be hurt. You may be mad. You start by choosing to pray.

And here's the second jump. This is where the race really takes endurance. Choose to stay soft. Verse 15: *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.* Choose to stay soft.

**PROJECTIONIST: PUT THE PICTURE OF THE POTTER AND THE POTTERY ON THE SCREEN.**

Isn't it the case, friend, that when someone has hurt you, or when someone continually rubs you the wrong way, it's easy to get hard? You hear something bad has happened to that person, and you think, "Good, serves them right. They're only getting what they deserve." You hear that they're going through a divorce; or that they've been fired from their job; or they are experiencing some other pain in their life – whatever you're saying verbally, "Oh, gee, that's too bad," inwardly you are gloating. "Well, they deserved it."

Do you know that God hates gloating? He hates when you rejoice over the pain of a difficult person in your life. Proverbs 24:17 says, *Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles.* God is a very merciful and forgiving God. Jesus taught us that the measure we give will be the measure we receive. He hates vindictiveness. He loves showing mercy. Have you ever prayed, "God, keep me from gloating"? When it says here, *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn*, God is saying, "My son, my daughter, I don't want you to get hard even with them. I want you, son, daughter, to choose to stay soft."

Some of you wonder why you don't sense much intimacy with God. Why don't you feel his gentle direction the way other people seem to feel it? Why don't you ever get any leadings? The same hardness we show to others will be reflected in our own lack of sensitivity to God. Mourn with those who mourn. Don't gloat when your difficult person is down.

And don't get envious or angry when they are doing well. Boy, that's a tough one. An early church father named John Chrysostom wisely said, "It is tougher for most of us to rejoice with those who rejoice than it is to mourn with those who mourn." When someone comes in and they are upset, even when you've had problems with them in the past, it's not that difficult to be tender towards them. But on the other hand, when someone you've had problems with is doing great, when they are rejoicing and people are praising them, it's hard to celebrate someone else's success, isn't it? Especially when you aren't very affectionate towards them.

You know, the woman that you have trouble with comes into the office, and she has a huge diamond ring that's blinding and she's talking about her new engagement and how she's marrying a neurosurgeon and they are moving into a big house. Rejoice with those who rejoice? Yet, that's the command here.

I boil it all down to choosing to stay soft.

If that was a hurdle, here's the first water trap: choose to die. Verse 16: *Live in harmony with each other. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

Here's what I see in the Bible. For two people to come together, for two people to be reconciled, a death always needs to take place. Something needs to die. You know what the Hebrew word for "covenant" or "agreement" means literally? We talk about the old covenant or the new covenant; Jesus said, "This is the new covenant in my blood." Do you know what covenant literally means? It means to cut.

This cutting took place in marriage ceremonies in the ancient world. A priest would take maybe a half dozen animals and slaughter them. He would slice them in half, and half would be on one side and half on the other. In between there would be an aisle. And the couple would walk down the aisle between the slaughtered animals. And what they were saying in this bloody ritual of slaughter was that for two people to come together in marriage, some things had to die – their pasts, their ties to their families, their separate lives. In the ancient world, every covenant, every coming together was sealed by a death. And, of course, the same thing is at work in restoring our relationship with God. If we are ever going to come together with God, be reconciled, a death has to occur – the death of Jesus.

Here's my point, if you are ever going to be reconciled to a difficult person, the principle of death also needs to be at work. There's never a restored relationship without a death. This is a principle that runs through the Bible.

You say, "Rich, where's the death in my relationship with my difficult person?"

Paul says, "You must die."

In verse 16: *Your pride must die.* Your standing on your rights must die. Your right to be bitter, your right to be understood, your right to have other people agree with your perspective, your self-pity – it's all got to die.

Listen to me. When Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must pick up his cross and follow me," what does that mean for you to pick up your cross in the year 2002? At the most basic level it means that your rights die, your pride dies, your need to win, to get your point across, dies. Reconciliation never takes place without a death.

Here's the next hurdle: Choose to be first to break the cycle of vengeance. Verse 17 says: *Do not repay evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the sight of all.* Verse 19 says: *Do not take revenge.* If someone hurts you or irritates you, isn't the natural response that you have to get even? Don't get mad, get even!

There was a dispute a few years ago between Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch, both of these media giants, multi-billionaires. Here are leaders of major corporations, people who have made billions of dollars in industry, and they were fighting over whether Turner's cable network was going to carry one of Murdoch's news stations – one of the Fox News stations. So Ted Turner refers to Rupert Murdoch as Hitler. He repeats this statement under oath in a deposition. He says Rupert Murdoch is interested in taking the food off our children's plates, putting everyone out of work. He challenges Rupert Murdoch to a boxing match.

Murdoch doesn't say anything. But through one of his newspapers, there is an opinion column that wonders whether Ted Turner is veering dangerously towards insanity? "His recent comments may be evidence that he is coming off his medication that he uses to fight manic depression."

There's a need to get even.

Marlon Brando, in a movie he was filming last year, got upset with the director, and so he decided that he was not going to wear pants when he was on the set. He came to the set in his boxer shorts every day and insisted that he be filmed from the waist up. He wanted to get even.

And when you are a famous actor, or a multi-billionaire, you can make a complete fool of yourself, I suppose, and get away with it.

All of this getting even where we constantly have to get the last word in, make our point, make sure that we can one-up it when someone says something – all of this getting even is a dead-end street. All it ever does is escalate the conflict. They do something, and then you get back. You do something, and they get back. We see it right now on a global scale with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, also in Pakistan and India. Everywhere in the world.

No one ever says, "Enough. I choose to end this. I will break the cycle."

How do you love a difficult person at your job? Choose to break the cycle. "Why me? Why don't they end it first?" Because Jesus said, "As the Father sent me into the world, so I am sending you." Jesus broke the hostility cycle between God and us. And now he sends us out into the world to do the same.

Let me get real here. What does this mean? The next time there is an icy silence between you and a co-worker, you and your spouse, you and your roommate, when no one is talking, you're both hurt and angry – you choose to break the silence. You take the first step. With your spouse, you be the first one to roll over in bed and say, "I love you." You call; you write the letter that ends the years of hurt between you and a family member. God says, "The ball, Christian, is in your court. It's your move."



Two more things real quickly. Choose to seek peace based on the truth. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Now, Paul puts two qualifications on us for making peace. We choose to pray. We choose to die. We choose to break the cycle of hostility. But there are two qualifications. Paul immediately adds to our ability to make peace with another person. He says, "If it is possible." *As far as it depends on you.* From your side, live at peace.

What Paul is saying is that he recognizes that it is not always possible to be at peace with someone. Sometimes they don't want a relationship with you. You've tried. You've tried. And you've tried.

Or they may not be willing to own up to the truth upon which any relationship is based. Sometimes people do not want integrity. They don't want truth-telling. "Yes, I'm willing to have a relationship with you, so long as we keep playing pretend. So long as I can keep drinking, keep sinning against you, keep stealing from you, keep harassing you, keep abusing you, we can have a relationship. When you insist on integrity and truth-telling, no."

This is so important, friend. Listen to me. Whenever the Bible tells us to seek peace, we have to read that in the context of who we are as Christians and the whole view of this world as having a moral structure to it. It is never peace at any price. It is peace based on the truth.

You know, one of the truly great men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a man named Bishop Desmond Tutu, of South Africa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize. It really was Bishop Tutu, almost single-handedly as Nelson Mandela's choice for heading up South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, who has prevented South Africa from even more violence and bloodshed and disintegration than it's presently experiencing. Nowhere in the world do you see a secular government pursuing this level of scriptural understanding of what it will take to heal a nation. Somewhere along the line, the victims of apartheid needed to be heard. There were so many awful crimes under apartheid.

Some people in South Africa said, "What we need to do is punish all those who were responsible for the crimes." Other people said, "Let's just forget the past and move on into a new South Africa." Bishop Tutu said, "It is necessary for us to remember, to speak the truth, to judge, and then to forgive." The Truth and Reconciliation Commission gives people an opportunity to speak and to communicate the depth of their suffering.

Of the thousands of people who come forward now, one woman's story really touched me. Her son was a very bright student. He did incredibly well at school. One evening the State Security Police smashed down the door and dragged him away. A few days later, she got a phone call from an anonymous police officer that she should go down to the morgue, that her son was there. When she went down, there was his body with 19 bullet wounds – an almost unrecognizable corpse.

Her grief overwhelmed her and overwhelmed the audience who listened. She began to weep, "I must know who did this to my son. When I see the face of the one who killed him, and he tells me why, then perhaps I can forgive." The victims have an opportunity to confront the perpetrators of crimes against them and their families. In that confrontation, healing takes place. One old man said, "Today the nation cried my tears with me. I'm no longer alone."

The perpetrators have an opportunity to express sorrow. One police officer who masterminded the butchering of a number of families in an attack on a rural village faced his victims and said to them, "I can never undo what I've done. I've no right to ask your forgiveness, but I ask that you will allow me to spend my life helping you rebuild your village and put your lives together."

Bishop Tutu understood that to heal a nation, to heal any relationship, we need more than justice, more than what law can provide. We need truth.

Listen, when God decided to make peace with us, he didn't say, "It's okay, whatever you've done, I'll just pretend there's never been a problem between us." He sent his son to die a bloody death, to pay for our sins. But he calls us to repent as a condition for receiving his forgiveness.

So, here's a difficult person in your life. You choose to pray for them. You choose to stay soft. You choose to die. You choose to end the cycle. And now when it comes to seeking peace, you say that peace needs to be based on truth. Not a phony peace, not our old "let's just sweep it under the carpet" peace, but peace based on truth-telling.

Now, here's the last obstacle in our steeplechase race. We've run through the water traps and over the various hurdles. Here's the last hurdle, and then we are running for the finish line. Choose to leave room for God. Verses 19-21: *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

God knows you've been hurt. He watched it happen. You don't need to get back at that person. You don't need to arrange all of the details of the trial of this individual. What you need is faith to believe that God can do something with this person and the relationship. God can work out all the details. God is the great judge and sovereign who can bring good out of this relational mess for everyone. Choose to leave room for God.

Give God a chance to do something. Get out of the way. God can change this difficult person. God can change your heart. It happens all the time. When you stop nagging and trying to control things, and you stop trying to be understood, and you finally throw

up your hands and say, “God, why aren’t you doing anything?”, you might hear a still small voice say, “There’s no room for me to do anything. Get out of my way.”

What does it mean when it says: *If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.* There’s been a lot of controversy about the meaning of this statement from the early church on. Some people have said it means to leave it up to God to bring judgment down on this person. Do good to your enemies so that God’s punishment on them will be more severe.

But I don’t think that fits the context here. The spirit of this whole text is the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount – to show goodness and mercy to the undeserving. I think what this text means is to do good to your enemy, and you will create in him or her a burning sense of shame. The burning coals that are heaped on a person’s head are the sense of shame. “Here this individual keeps doing me good. He keeps reaching out to me. He keeps showing kindness to me when I’m so utterly undeserving.” The shame of that experience will cause that individual to turn from being an enemy to being a friend.

These were the tactics of Dr. Martin Luther King.

#### **PROJECTIONIST: PUT THE PHOTO OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**

If we don’t return evil for evil, we have a chance not only of changing the law, but of changing people’s hearts.

Every one of us has a difficult person in our lives, usually more than one. We cannot work in a place without having strained relationships. But here is the call of God to his followers: Choose to love that difficult person in your life.

Amen.

## **Choosing to Love a Difficult Co-Worker**

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Rich Nathan

May 4-5, 2002

Work: Christians in the Workplace

Romans 12:14-21

### **I. The Conditions for Love**

- A. These Commands are for Christians (Romans 12:11)
- B. These Commands Involve Choices

### **II. The Choices to Love**

- A. Choose to Pray (Romans 12:14)
- B. Choose to Stay Soft (Romans 12: 15)
- C. Choose to Die (Romans 12:16)
- D. Choose to Break the Cycle (Romans 12:17)
- E. Choose to Seek Peace Based on the Truth (Romans 12:18)
- F. Choose to Leave Room for God (Romans 12:19-21)