

Dealing with Imperfect People

M. W. Bassford, 2-3-13

It is important that in our worship here, we do all things in an orderly manner, but sometimes the results are frustrating. For instance, at the end of my most recent stint in the adult class, I was teaching one night, and we were in the middle of a discussion about dissension and speaking negatively of others, and the bell rang. Naturally, we didn't have the opportunity to revisit it before my time as teacher came to an end, so there it rested.

However, one of the joys of being a preacher as well as a Bible-class teacher is that for me, no topic is ever dead. It simply gets reincarnated as a sermon, and that's what we're going to do this morning in addressing that important topic. After all, every one of us has at some point in our lives gotten into it with another human being. What do we do then, when they don't behave like we think they should? Let's look, then, at how to deal with imperfect people.

Types of Imperfection

We're going to begin by considering several types of imperfection. The first kind might be an imperfection only from our perspective, but that's the way we see it at the time. It's caused by plain and simple **DIFFERENCES OF OPINION**. There is probably not one single person on the planet with whom I agree about everything, and differences of opinion were just as common 2000 years ago. Look at the experience of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:39-40. Let's observe first of all that this difference of opinion does not involve a question of sin and righteousness. God did not insist either that John Mark accompany Paul and Barnabas or that he be left behind. He left that matter to the judgment of the men involved, and they disagreed so sharply that they went their separate ways. This same trait is going to be characteristic of any human difference of opinion. We may disagree strenuously, but there is no heaven-sent right answer.

Another kind of imperfection that is not nearly so subjective is **SIN**. Paul cites an instance of this in 1 Corinthians 5:1. This Christian was doing something that even the godless Gentiles recognized was wrong. He was committing sexual immorality with his stepmother. This was no judgment call. It was something that God explicitly condemned. Naturally, sin has not vanished from the earth since the day of Paul, nor has it vanished from the church. I would suspect that every kind of immorality in the Bible is being practiced somewhere by someone who was once baptized into Christ, and these people bring shame upon themselves and their Lord by their defiance of His will.

Sometimes, these so-called brethren practice their sin openly. At other times, though, they prefer to keep it hidden so that they appear to be in subjection to Christ. They practice **HYPOCRISY**. Once again, this is no different than it was 2000 years ago. Consider Paul's comments on none other than the apostle Peter in Galatians 2:12-13. It's hard to say precisely when this event occurred. My guess is that it took place at the end of Paul's first missionary journey, before he and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to provoke the council of Acts 15. What is perfectly clear, though, is that Peter is behaving in a hypocritical way. He knows that it's perfectly godly to eat with Gentile Christians, but so as to avoid the condemnation of some Judaizing teachers from Jerusalem, he begins to shun his brethren. What's interesting here is that it points to another kind of hypocrisy. Usually, we think of hypocrisy as hiding our true nature from the good. We live a dissolute life six days of the week, but come strutting into church on Sunday as holier-than-thou as we could be. That's certainly hypocritical, but we can be every bit as two-faced when we imitate Peter and conceal our true beliefs from the ungodly. When we laugh politely at our co-worker's dirty joke, when we are given an opportunity to proclaim Christ but dodge the question instead, those things are hypocrisy too. Hypocrites of any stripe do real damage to the church.

Equally damaging are people who engage in **CONTENTIOUSNESS**. Paul speaks of this behavior in the early church in 1 Corinthians 1:11. You know, it's so surreal to me when I'm talking with a disaffected Christian, and they complain about all the bickering that mars the church, and they speak glowingly of how harmonious the denominational world is, and how we need to give up on all the infighting and be like the first-century church instead. That line of argument is bizarre on two different grounds. First, anybody who thinks the various denominations are harmonious has spent no time among said denominations. Generally, denominations exist to concentrate power and money, and the more power and money there are, the more people fight over them. Second, just about every first-century church we know of had some kind of internal strife. The church in Corinth is the most obvious example, but there are many others. Sure, all the quarreling that goes on in the church today is a problem, but it was a problem 2000 years ago too.

However, the fact that the problem is apparently unavoidable doesn't make it any less of a problem. Whenever we get into it with a brother or sister in Christ, we damage the church and hinder its work. We might feel like we're doing something righteous in constantly starting arguments and stirring up emotions, but in reality, we're serving the devil.

Finally, and most subtly, human imperfection expresses itself in **APATHY**. Speaking of churches with problems, this was the problem of the church in Laodicea, as revealed by Revelation 3:15-16. Similarly, there's no shortage of lukewarm Christians today, people who don't quite manage to forsake the Lord entirely, but don't manage to do anything for Him either. This is the problem that we face when we are filled with good intentions, but there's always something that comes up that keeps us from putting those good intentions into practice. This is certainly a soul-endangering

problem for the apathetic, but it can also be a tremendous source of frustration for other Christians, who feel like they're working as hard as they can, but the lukewarm brethren are only along for the ride. From these accusations and counter-accusations of apathy can a whole ocean of contention arise. Apathy has a corrosive effect on the church.

Jesus and Imperfection

When we consider all the ways that people can give us problems, we're tempted to build a shack in the North Woods, go live there, and nail the door shut so nobody can bother us ever again. However, if we truly want to be disciples of our Master, Jesus, we must learn to deal with human imperfection the way that He did. As we often do, we're going to use the study of this aspect of our Lord's character this morning to prepare our minds for His Supper.

One of the first things that stands out about Jesus' interactions with others was His **INSISTENCE ON THE WORD** as a universal standard for human conduct. We see what Jesus thought about the Scriptures in His words in Matthew 5:17-18. Today, the word we have is different than the one Jesus used. After all, when He said this, the New Testament hadn't even begun to be written. However, in our dealings with others, we must follow the same concept.

If the word is our standard, this is going to apply in two main ways. First of all, it's going to determine the way we view others. Here's how this should work: Every one of us comes from a different background. We all have different likes and dislikes, and that can lead to different personal perspectives on people. I might find a brother's sense of humor goofy and endearing; another might be annoyed by it. However, those personal likes and dislikes aren't what matter. Jesus didn't care about such things, and we shouldn't either. Instead, we should concern ourselves only with another's obedience to the word. Among other things, this will lead us to seek our closest friends among brethren.

Second, if the word is truly our standard, it will govern our own conduct as well. We cannot rightly condemn sin in others, yet excuse it in ourselves. That kind of hypocrisy was never evident in the life of Jesus. Instead, it was his own perfect adherence to the word that gave Him the moral standing He needed to convict others.

Second, when the situation warranted, Jesus was willing to use **REPROOF**. Look at the way He dealt with Peter in Mark 8:32-33. Jesus had just finished revealing to the disciples that He was going to be crucified. Peter didn't like hearing it, so he grabbed Jesus and told Him to quit talking nonsense. This showed both Peter's lack of understanding of God's will and probably also his desire to see Christ establish an earthly kingdom in which Peter would be exalted too. Peter is clearly wrong, but if many of us had been in Jesus' sandals on this occasion, we would have hesitated. We might have worried about whether Peter would be angry at us for rebuking Him. We might have been concerned that we were going to drive Peter away and he wouldn't want to be an apostle anymore. We might even have preferred gossiping with John later over an unpleasant confrontation with one of our leading apostles.

Jesus, however, didn't do any of those things. He could tell that Peter needed to hear the truth, and Jesus told it to him straight. We might be shocked at the bluntness with which Jesus speaks, but we must recognize that this too was handed down as an example for our conduct. When we dodge the issue of unrighteousness, we gain nothing.

Indeed, Jesus was even willing to express outright **CONDEMNATION**. Look at what He says about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:2-4. Jesus' point is that the scribes and lawyers handled their traditions the way a tax lawyer or accountant today handles our tax code. The Pharisees held others to this incredibly high standard of conduct, but because they were experts, they knew where all the loopholes in their traditions were, and they took them, with the result that their actions didn't live up to their words. Jesus had no patience for such ungodliness, and he did not hesitate to condemn and even insult its practitioners. Once again, this is an area where the example of Jesus appears to pose real problems for His disciples today. If someone asked us what we thought of Billy Graham, for instance, would we have the courage to tell them we believed he was a false teacher and explain why? If someone else started telling us about the baptism of their baby grandchild, would we use the opportunity to explain Bible baptism to them instead?

Certainly, many people would consider that kind of forthrightness rude. I'm a big believer in politeness and courtesy, but it's neither polite nor courteous to allow others to continue on to destruction without at least warning them about the choice they're making. Yes, if we speak up, we will develop some enemies, but Jesus had enemies too. In fact, what man of God described in the New Testament didn't create enemies because of his polarizing words? Discipleship isn't a buffet, where we get to pick the parts we like. Either we follow Jesus, or we don't.

However, as Jesus could be blunt where the situation required it, He could also show great **COMPASSION** where the situation required that. Consider the words of His appeal in Matthew 11:28-30. Where the scribes and the Pharisees looked to bind heavy burdens on men, Jesus promised His disciples a light burden and an easy yoke. Christianity can certainly be a difficult road sometimes, but it beats any of the alternatives. Christ is certainly an easier master than the devil is, and He also sets us free from all of the encumbering traditions of the denominational world. He makes it possible for us to have a relationship with God ourselves. That has always been his offer to people with honest hearts. Likewise, we must also be compassionate to those who are genuinely seeking God. There is a subtle but profound difference between someone who is looking for truth and someone who is looking for an argument, and we need to be

conscious of it. It may be possible for a wide-eyed new convert and a grizzled old agitator to ask exactly the same question in Bible class, yet need two completely different answers. That's the way Jesus handled things.

Finally, Jesus also knew when He needed to respond with **FORGIVENESS**. We see one of many instances of this in Luke 19:7-9. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, a Roman collaborator, among the lowest of the low in Jewish society, yet Jesus forgave him on the basis of his repentance and his innate nature as a son of Abraham. Today, we must be willing to extend forgiveness to others on the same basis. Clearly, we can't forgive sins. Only God can do that. However, we can and indeed are expected to forgive others for the times when they sin against us. Nor should our forgiveness be accompanied by mental reservations. We can't imagine Jesus gossiping about Zacchaeus after his repentance or looking at him sideways for six months, and those things aren't appropriate for disciples of Jesus either.

Before the Lord's Supper, all of this is spiritually useful to us in two main ways. First, as always, it challenges us with the example of Jesus, and the example of the way that Jesus handled others is particularly challenging. The most conspicuous characteristic of Jesus' interactions with imperfect people is the way He perfectly matched answer to person. Most of us, by contrast, struggle with that. The more assertive among us have to learn that there's a time NOT to go after somebody hammer and tongs, but those of us who are less confrontational also have a lesson in our Lord—that there are times to stand up for what we believe. Let's think about how we balance those things in our own lives.

Second, we should also remember that Jesus' compassion and forgiveness weren't a matter of word only. Instead, He had such compassion for us, despite our sin, and desired so greatly to forgive us that He was willing to die to see it accomplished. Every word that Jesus uttered was spoken out of love, but love was also the motivation for every action He carried out. To that love we owe not just our lives but our souls. Let's remember it as we remember Him.

What We Should Do

Now that we've recalled to mind what our Lord did in His dealings with the imperfect, let's look at what we should do. In this, the first rule is to **START WITH OURSELVES**. Jesus puts this in characteristically blunt terms in Matthew 7:5. I don't know where any of our lives will take us, but I know one thing for sure. We live in an imperfect world filled with imperfect people. Our schools and workplaces will always be imperfect, our marriages will always be imperfect, and our church will always be imperfect. If we are so inclined, we will always have something to complain about. 99.9 percent of the time, our complaining accomplishes nothing good, and it often produces great harm.

However, there is one imperfect entity I left off the list. In addition to being surrounded by imperfect people, each one of us is also an imperfect person, and the only imperfect person I can change is myself. Spiritual growth is a lot harder than complaining, and it isn't nearly as much fun. However, growth makes me part of the solution, and complaining only adds me to the problem. Here's a suggestion for all of us: The next time we're tempted to complain about anything, but especially about something in the church, let's count to ten and ask what we can do instead to make the church better. Rather than cursing the darkness, let's look for ways to light a candle instead.

Second, let's take the opportunities we are given to **ENCOURAGE**. We see this epitomized by Barnabas in Acts 11:22-23. In fact, that's what "Barnabas" means: Son of Encouragement. I daresay that if the number of complainers on Planet Earth suddenly dropped to zero, we would all be better off for it. However, neither the planet nor the congregation can ever have too many people who look to encourage. One of the characteristics of humankind is that we pay more attention to failures than to successes. A pitcher can pitch well for seven innings and give up a single home run, but all everybody is going to remember is the home run ball. Likewise, we're much more likely to home in on the 5 percent that a brother or sister isn't doing right than on the 95 percent that they are. That's hardly fair.

Instead, let's imitate the spirit of our Lord and His compassion toward human struggles. Let's take the effort to understand where somebody else is coming from, why they might be having the difficulties they are, and praise them for the things they're doing right rather than beating them up for the things they're doing wrong. It takes more effort to encourage than it does to criticize, but it is much more likely to produce lasting good fruits.

Third, we should also remember to **BE HUMBLE**. Paul makes this point in Colossians 3:12. Believe me, I understand self-righteousness much better than I would like to. I understand what it's like to look at someone else and see so clearly what they need to be doing better, and how simple it would be for them to do so, and so on. I would have every right to do so if I were some kind of disembodied spirit of justice floating around, without struggles and flaws of my own. In reality, of course, I'm as human as anybody else. In reality, the problems that I see in others that make me angriest are often the problems I have the most difficulty with myself. Even should the situation arise where I need to talk to someone about their spiritual battles, I can't ride in on my high horse to do it. Jesus WAS perfect. He DID have the right to the high horse, yet He showed tremendous meekness in the way He dealt with penitent sinners. Instead, every word I say to or about someone should be informed by an awareness of my own frailty, that if indeed another has sinned, they've done no more than I have. When we learn humility, it changes everything we say to others.

Next, we must remember to **BEAR WITH**. This is the next point in Colossians 3, Colossians 3:13. Just about every human being I've ever met has a bucketful of quirks and foibles. Some have even managed to do things that I

found extraordinarily annoying. Paul's take on this is very simple. He says, "So what?" No matter how annoying someone may manage to be, he is still created in the image of God, and God expects me to love him. If he is a Christian, God even expects me to like him. To reiterate, yes, we are commanded to like our brethren, not just the likable ones, but all of them. That doesn't leave a whole lot of room for personal preference, does it?

However, some brethren take things to the opposite extreme. They are so touchy, so determined to believe ill of other Christians, that they will construct whole conspiracies of sin out of thin air. Rather than bearing with, they look for excuses to stir up strife. I suspect that this way of looking at the world is much more obvious from the outside than from the inside, but this might be a test to determine whether we have fallen into this trap. If we believe that our brother has sinned against us, but we aren't willing to go to him and talk to him about it, could it be that we aren't willing to go to him because we know that he hasn't really done anything wrong, and if we bring his supposed misdeeds up, we'll only sound foolish? There is no room for animosity or dislike in the Lord's body, and there shouldn't be in our hearts.

Finally, in the situations where we are confronted with sin in another, we must **BE FORTHRIGHT**. We see an instance of this in Galatians 2:11. I've said it before; I'll say it again: There is no more violated commandment in Scripture than the commandment to go to our brother if we believe he is engaged in wrongdoing. We'll go to the elders if we've got 'em, we'll go to the preacher, we'll go to our buddies, but we won't go to our brother. We will talk to just about anybody except for the one God has commanded us to talk to! There are two possible situations here: Either the thing our brother is doing that bugs us isn't a sin, in which case it is none of our business, or it is a sin, in which case we should be looking to talk to him at the next available opportunity. There is no third way, and 99 percent of church troubles arise because brethren insist on looking for the third way that God has forbidden. Let's not make the same mistake.