

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, May 26, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 12:18

“If it is possible, as far as it depends
on you, live at peace with everyone.”

GOD AND MY WORK

(4) COPING WITH CRANKY CO-WORKERS

A recent cover article in Newsweek magazine was called, “Stress on the job: what you and your boss can do about it.” It says that the number one source of stress is people. Is that a surprise to anybody? It talks about different kinds of difficult people we have to deal with. It says that Patricia King, in her new book, Never Work for a Jerk, tells the story of Marlene Miranda, a secretary in a large company. Marlene’s boss, a relentless slave driver, would often call her at home, late at night, to dictate reports, and then order her to get to work early and have them typed by the time he would reach his desk!

What does God have to say about job stress related to people? Today we’re going to look at six principles on how to deal with personal conflict, or how to cope with cranky co-workers. Let me give you a few types of people that we sometimes meet in the work place.

- 1. Demanding people.** These are the dictators of life, the little Napoleons. They’re very controlling, very intimidating. They try to dominate everybody. They are oppressive and rude and make unrealistic demands on your time. You’ve heard about the boss who had a plaque in his office that said, “I don’t get ulcers, I give ‘em”! Did you ever work for anyone like that?
- 2. Dishonest people.** They are the snakes in the grass. They lie to you; they will cheat you. They have no integrity. They will promise one thing and deliver another. They will betray you. You cannot trust them at all. And it’s difficult to work for or with that kind of person.
- 3. Disagreeable people.** They are the chronic complainers of life. They’re always negative, grumpy and grouchy. Nothing is ever satisfactory. They love to argue, and they’re mad at the world. They can blow up at the drop of a hat. They’re not team players.
- 4. Defensive people.** Some of you work with people who are touchy and thin-skinned. They take offense easily. And when you’re around them, you have to walk on egg shells.
- 5. Demeaning people.** They’re always putting you down, always insulting you. They’re disrespectful. They’re so insecure that they have to build themselves up by tearing you down. They’re always critical, and nothing you do is ever good enough.

Now what does the Bible say about dealing with these kinds of people? Well, we’re going to look at six principles this morning.

1. The Bible says, “Realize that you can’t please everybody.” Remember our text: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” The key words there are, “as far as it depends on you.” Have you realized that there are some people you just can’t please, no matter how nice you are to them? Some people are simply unpleasable. And remember this: you don’t need to please everyone. Look at Proverbs 29:25 (Good News Bible): “It is dangerous to be concerned with what others think of you...” It is an emotional trap when you start worrying about what other people think of you. You don’t have to please everybody, any more than you can please everybody. There’s a myth that says, “I must be liked and approved by everybody in order to be happy.” That’s just not true.

Even God can’t please everybody. One person wants it to rain; another person wants it not to rain! Texas people pray that oil prices will go up; I pray that they’ll go down! In John 5:30 Jesus says, “I seek to please Him Who sent Me.” Even Jesus didn’t try to please everybody, so why should you try to? In Luke 6:26, our Lord says, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you.” The only time everybody’s going to speak well of you is when you’re dead! If you feel guilty because you can’t make peace with someone, do remember this -- it may not be your fault. Some people are simply unpleasable.

2. Refuse to retaliate. When those people come out with their guns smoking, and try to attack you, remember 1 Peter 3:9: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult.” Let me ask you - when somebody insults you, what is your natural reaction? “Get even!” Insult him back! We Americans are masters at the art of “put down.” A book was published a few years ago entitled 3000 Put Downs. It’s a riot! The only problem is that, as a pastor, I can only quote a few of them. But here’s a sample or two: “She must use gunpowder on her face; it always looks shot!” “He has a really unusual voice; it’s like asthma set to music!” “She talks so much her tongue got sunburned!” “She thinks her chin is her best feature; but to me it looks like a double feature!”

The Bible says in Proverbs 12:16 (Good News Bible), “When a fool is annoyed, he quickly lets it be known. Smart people will ignore an insult.” If you are immature, you are easily offended. You can always tell a mature Christian by the fact that it is almost impossible to offend him or her. They just don’t take things personally. Jesus refused to be intimidated by insults. He wouldn’t waste time or energy responding to them.

Proverbs 21:23 (Good News Bible) says, “If you want to stay out of trouble, be careful what you say.” How many of you believe that works? It reminds me of the pastor who bought a parrot, and the seller said, “It’s a great parrot, but if you don’t feed it, it swears.” And one day he forgot to feed it, and it just let out this blue streak of profanity. So, he grabbed it and said, “I’m going to teach you a lesson,” and he threw him into the freezer, and left him there for 25 minutes. When he took him out, he was blue and shivering violently, and almost limp with weakness; and the parrot said, “Boy, have I learned my lesson! But I’d sure like to know what that turkey in there said.” You’ve got to watch what you say, folks!

3. In dealing with difficult people, refuse to argue. The Bible teaches this very clearly. Don’t be drawn into arguments with cranky co-workers. The best illustration of this is our Lord

Himself. In Matthew 22:15 and 18 (Good News Bible), we read that “The Pharisees went off and made a plan to trap Jesus with questions” “Jesus, however, was aware of their evil plan, and so He said, ‘You hypocrites! Why are you trying to trap Me?’” He simply would not play their game. He would not be drawn into an argument.

You must realize that there are some people who love to get you into arguments. Why? Because that’s the way they get your attention. And if you won’t give them positive attention, they’ll get negative attention. And when they get you into an argument, they feel they are controlling you. So, refuse to argue. Don’t be drawn into that trap.

Proverbs 26:21 (Good News Bible) says, “Wood keeps the fire burning, and troublemakers keep arguments alive.” Isn’t that the truth? You know, some people just thrive on office politics! They go over here and get one group arguing, and then they go over there and get another group complaining, and they just keep the pot boiling. Why do they do that? Because they become the center of attention! They get their kicks out of spreading discontent.

Employers should get rid of that kind of person because they can sabotage a business. A troublemaker should not be allowed to destroy the morale of your business. Proverbs 22:10 (Living Bible) says, “Throw out the mocker, and you will be rid of tension, fighting and quarrels.” And in Titus 3:10 we read, “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.”

4. Refuse to cave in. A lot of Christians think that they are supposed to submit, and let people walk all over them. Not so. Don’t allow yourself to be manipulated. Romans 12:2 (Phillips) says, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.” Now remember this, no one can pressure you without your permission. If you feel pressured by a cranky co-worker, you’re allowing yourself to feel pressured by that person. “Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold.” That means that it’s OK to stand up for what’s right. It’s OK to be assertive when you know something’s right. Many Christians are afraid to speak up; and so they let people around them get away with murder, as if it’s more “spiritual” just to be quiet and put up with it all. The fact is, God never made you to be a wimp. He doesn’t expect you to be a doormat.

But you say, “Isn’t the Christian supposed to be meek?” Yes, that’s true, but meekness is not weakness. The word “meek” in Greek literally means “strength under control.” It is used of a wild stallion that has been broken, and now is tamed. That stallion still has as much power when it is tamed as when it was wild, but now that power is controlled for the master’s use. It is strength under control. There are only two people in the Bible who are called “meek”: Jesus and Moses; and neither of them was a weakling. They were people of strong conviction. So God doesn’t expect you to cave in every time someone wants to manipulate you or control you.

Now suppose this week your boss asks you to do something that is immoral or illegal or just unreasonable. How do you deal with that? Well, look at what Jesus says in Matthew 5:36 (Jerusalem Bible): “All you need say is ‘Yes’ if you mean yes, ‘No’ if you mean no; anything more than this comes from the evil one.” Circle the word “no” in that verse; because what I want to say to you this morning is that for a Christian, “No” is not a dirty word. It’s OK to say “No.” Many Christians don’t seem to be able to say “No”; and they’re burned out because they’ve said

“Yes” to 50 things they shouldn’t be doing, because they don’t know how to say “No.” The Bible teaches us that we’ve got to have conviction and courage. And if that were so, we wouldn’t have even some Christian young people across this country on drugs and into sex because they don’t know how to say “No.” They don’t know how to stand up against pressure. They don’t know how to be assertive in the right way. As a Christian, you say “Yes” when you mean yes, and you say “No” when you mean no. And the Bible doesn’t say anything about feeling guilty when you do that. Never make excuses for your convictions.

If you work for any length of time, you will be around somebody who will try to intimidate and manipulate and control you. How does God want you to deal with a person like that? Look at 2 Timothy 1:7 (Good News Bible): “For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead, His Spirit fills us with power, love and self-control.” He wants you to deal with them in power -- He wants you to be self-confident: in love -- that means that you focus on their need; and in self-control -- that means that you don’t blow up. And it says that God’s Spirit does not make us timid; our faith doesn’t turn us into weaklings. Phillips translation of this verse says, “God has not given us a spirit of cowardice...” And the Living Bible renders it, “The Holy Spirit... does not want you to be afraid of people...” And yet there are Christians who think that in order to be “spiritual,” you just have to let people have their own way and run over you. The Bible nowhere says that.

5. You resolve conflict quickly. You don’t let it fester. Have you ever heard this line - “Just ignore it, and hope it will go away”? From experience have you learned that that just doesn’t work? It doesn’t. Ignoring conflict does not get rid of it. Look at what the Bible says in Ephesians 4:26,27 (Good News Bible): “If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day. Don’t give the Devil a chance.”

Should a Christian ever get angry? Yes. Did Jesus ever get angry? Yes. But did Jesus ever sin? No. So evidently there is a right way to get angry, and there’s a wrong way to get angry. There is an anger that leads you into sin, and there’s an anger that doesn’t lead you into sin. Well, how do I know the difference? What’s the wrong kind, of anger? The wrong kind of anger is when a conflict is not resolved quickly. Don’t stay angry all day, because that only gives the devil his chance. Don’t let anger hang on, because anger that is not dealt with quickly turns into resentment and bitterness; and bitterness is always sin.

Anger is often an appropriate response. In fact, if you love people, you ought to get angry sometimes. I get angry when I see people walking into the middle of something that will destroy them, because I care. But you deal with anger quickly, because if you swallow your anger, your stomach will keep score. A lot of stress at work is just conflict that has never been dealt with.

Well, what’s the solution? I’ll tell you, but you’re not going to like it! The solution is one word -- confrontation. Lovingly go to the person, and, speaking the truth in love, deal with the conflict right up front. Let me ask you: how many of you enjoy confrontation? The only people who like confrontation are troublemakers! They love it! But remember, it’s the only way to resolve conflict. It’s risky, granted. It might backfire in your face; but regardless of the response, you have brought the matter out into the open, and if they respond with hostility, that’s their problem. But you have obeyed this morning’s text: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,

live at peace with everyone.”

How do I confront a person? Well, James 1:19 gives us three rules for confronting other people: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” If you obey the first two, the third is automatic. If you’re quick to listen, and slow to speak, you will be slow to become angry. Someone said, “God gave us two ears and one mouth, so we ought to listen twice as much as we talk.”

What do you listen for? You listen for the hurt in that person, because “hurt people hurt people.” And when you have got someone who is “a jerk at work,” it is often because that person is hurting. And when you begin to understand their hurt, maybe just a little bit, you gain a better understanding of why they do what they do; and you’re a bit more patient with them. Understanding always brings patience.

6. In dealing with cranky co-workers, respond with love. That’s the bottom line. In spite of their behavior and their attitude, you respond with love.

You see, God wants you to remember two things concerning your relationship with the people you meet this week:

- a. God loves them. That may be hard to believe, but God loves that “jerk at work”! In fact, God loves him as much as He loves you. God loves unconditionally. And not only that, but
- b. God wants to teach you how to love the unlovely. God is love (1 John 4:8), and if we want to be like Him, we’ve got to learn to be loving. It is easy to love people who are lovely, but if God is going to teach you genuine love, He’s going to put you around some unlovely people. That’s why they’re there!

Now, love is giving people what they need, not what they deserve. That doesn’t mean that you give in to them; sometimes that’s the last thing they need. The last thing a steamroller needs is for you to lie down in front of it! “Tough love” is what that person needs. Sometimes the most loving thing to do is to call their bluff. Someone has to care enough to confront them and stand up to them.

In Matthew 5:44 (King James Version) Jesus gives us four actions for dealing with people who antagonize us: “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.” You love them; you bless them; you do good to them; and you pray for them. Let me tell you a little secret. If you’ll do the last one first, the other three will come automatically. If you start praying for those people who irritate you on your job, or at home, or at school, it’s much easier to love them, and bless them, and do good to them; because you cannot pray for someone without having your own attitude eventually changed.

When the world puts pressure on you at work, if you’re filled with love, love comes out. If you’re filled with anger, anger comes out. Whatever is inside always comes out when the pressure is applied. You see that every time you squeeze a tube of toothpaste. You see, if you are

filled with love, almost nothing will irritate you. The finest mark of maturity in a Christian is that you don't get offended easily.

Now think for a moment about that person you're having the hardest time with in your life. Let me ask you two questions:

(1) What is your normal way of dealing with that person? How do you normally respond to that person? And

(2) Is it working? Is it reducing the stress in your life, or does that person still infuriate you? There's a beautiful promise of God in Proverbs 16:7, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies live at peace with him." When God sees me reacting to people in the manner in which He has laid out in His Word, and, when my ways are pleasing to Him, He makes even my enemies shut up!

So, we have looked this morning at six ways in which God wants you to respond to people this week; and I urge you to practice them.

AMEN.