

3, Unpleasant People? Destroy 'Em—with Love

Do you dread seeing certain people as the holidays approach? Are you already planning to avoid them by gluing yourself to the TV in the den or the dishes in the kitchen? When you gather for Thanksgiving or Christmas, will you open your heart to the people you enjoy while ignoring or disdain others?

If so, hear the words of Christ: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. But love your enemies, do good to them. Then you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (excerpts from Luke 6:32-35). This is hard to do! But it is a sign of spiritual maturity to patiently interact and forbear with immature or unpleasant people.

Dear brother or sister in Christ, to love is to risk. And our love for God is so closely tied to our love for people that we will never love God more than we love the people in our lives. (1 John 4: 7-12)

One sign of spiritual maturity is the ability to forbear with diverse people—regardless of temperament, relational styles, even spiritual or emotional maturity—and to learn to walk graciously and winsomely by keeping your heart fixed on Jesus.

• Whether they are thin-skinned or sharp-tongued, do not react in kind. Instead, speak carefully! Edify them by ministering God's grace to them:

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." Eph 4:29

• Each time their quirky tendency or personality trait grates on you, forbear with them. By faith, remember God's mercy to you and choose to be kind to them:

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Col 3: 13

And what about the truly painful relationships, in which you have been (and maybe even now are being) rejected, attacked, hated, abandoned? Particularly when it is a *brother or sister in Christ* who is treating you cruelly? What do you do then? The only Christian thing to do is *destroy 'em!* Reach into the arsenal of heaven (Rom. 12), and respond to their terrible and terrific wrongs against you with the ultimate weapon: deliberate, focused love.

"In view of God's mercy...Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Be patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (excerpts from Rom. 12). We are not to do this because the person *deserves* your kindness and mercy, but out of *gratitude* for God's kindness and mercy to you. This may feel impossible, but God is faithful! He will never call you to do something unless he provides the grace for you to do it.

The key to our holiday peace begins and ends with God. As we navigate the calendar minefield of Thanksgiving to



Christmas, may we remember that the love that covers over a multitude of sins is pure *grace* (1 Pet. 4:8). And by faith, may we thickly ladle that grace over our Thanksgiving meal, Christmas feast, and every day in between.

Walking in Peace

Amid Holiday Strife

by Tara Klena Barthel



According to the catalogs and TV commercials, the holidays are supposed to be filled with joy, music, laughter, and love—happy people doing happy things. For many of us, however, the holiday

season is often one of stress, grief, and *conflict*. Instead of "Thanksgiving gratitude" and "glad tidings of great joy," we find ourselves miserable and angry over small matters ("Who spilled on the velvet tablecloth? Mrs. Critical will be here any moment—what will she think?"). And we catch ourselves pasting on a fake grin as we seethe over yet another sarcastic comment from a relative ("Oh, don't be so sensitive! I was only kidding").

As we walk through the clamor of the holidays, our relationships may reflect a "peace" as weak and flimsy as a sheet of thin gift-wrapping paper from the dollar store. How can we get past the façade of fake holiday happiness and truly wrap this season in a blanket of grace, joy, and love?

1. Remember the Prince of Peace

If we are to walk as people of peace during the stress of the holidays, we must first begin by remembering the greatness of God and all that *he has done for us* in Christ. Then we can move on to *how we are to live* in light of these truths. If we try to skip the first step and move to the changing of our behavior, we will probably end up frustrated both by our own failures as well as the fallenness of those around us.

Our only hope is in God—he justifies us, redeems us, delivers us from our shame, and conforms us to Christ (Romans 8:29). Such a God! Such a Savior! *This* is the Jesus whose birth we celebrate during this Christmas holiday season.

As *The Peacemaker Seminar* reminds us, if we are not rejoicing in the Lord *always* (Phil. 4:4), we are probably *forgetting him altogether*. It is ironic, to be sure, but often we forget the Lord most quickly during the very season meant to commemorate his incarnation and birth.

Pray for the grace to turn afresh to him! Gaze on his holiness, justice, mercy, and compassion. Remember the depth of your sin and the greatness of your salvation (Matt. 18:32-35).

For we will only give grace to *others* to the extent that we remember God's lavish grace to *us*.

2. Embrace Defeat! Your Holidays Will Not Be Perfect

One clear cause of conflict and stress during the holidays is our focused effort to create the "perfect" holiday celebration. We get misty-eyed over the "Folger's Christmas commercial" and then extend great amounts of effort and energy attempting to re-create and control our own "perfect" version. Any deviations from "the script" are met with impatience, frustration, even anger.

"We *will* have a perfect, happy Christmas!" our idolatrous hearts demand. "And there will be no holly-jolly pleasure for anyone or anything that tries to get in our way!"

Don't fall for the lie of the "perfect holiday." Save yourself vast amounts of frustration and admit—even embrace—defeat before you begin. Otherwise, if you are living to please people, you will be frustrated, unhappy, and ensnared (Prov. 29:25). It is only when we do all things for God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31) that we will find joy in the messy, but infinitely more rewarding world of *reality*.

Now, I know this may be particularly difficult for those of us who love to have everything "just so." Personally, I love order—and I've been this way my entire life! In fact, I recently came upon an old letter to Santa that I wrote when I was about seven years old. The letter read:



"Dear Santa. I am trying to be good. I would like some office supplies.

Love, Tara."

I remember that Christmas with absolute glee! A stapler, pencils, colored pads of paper, manila folders! What joy! A place for everything and everything in its place, that's always been my motto. But my zeal for perfection and order has too often come at a high cost—I've worried, fretted, and kept myself bound in anxiety.

Over time, however, I have learned that when people are not perfect (notice I said "when," not "if"), when decorations are "less-than-Martha," when our recipes flop, and when people veer off of the "script" and begin to speak from their hearts and hurts, that is when we have the opportunity to abide with one another and give each other grace through laughter, kindness, confession, forgiveness, and love. These "ties that bind" are what truly knit our hearts together and reflect the Lord.

There is great joy in remembering that the world sees Jesus in the quietness of true friendship and intimate love (John 17:23), not in having perfectly coordinated gold and red table settings. In all we do, may we remember that the love that covers over a multitude of sins is pure grace. If this is our holiday script, we will never be disappointed with the results.