

# When a Family Member Annoys

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The title of today's message is, *When a Family Member Annoys*. Let me make sure you know what we mean by annoy. We are not talking about when a family member sins against you. These lines may be fuzzy as a family member's unkind word or outburst probably isn't the Holy Spirit speaking. So yes, there are likely sinful motives. We also aren't talking about destructive sins family members will do like violence, theft, slander, or abuse. These rise to levels where protection and the laws of the land are required. We aren't talking about compulsive levels of destructive behavior which require boundaries and interventions.

We are talking about the slights, the little power struggles, the chronic habits family members have which over time can infuriate us. Chronically late. Chronically lazy. Chronically selfish. Chronically passive aggressive. Chronically jealous. Chronically an Eeyore about everything. Chronically asking for money. Chronically mooching. Chronically rude or profane. Chronically boorish. Chronically contentious. Chronically divisive. Chronically requiring everyone to bow to them. Chronically awkward. Chronically and incredibly annoying.

These are things you deal with decently on day one of the Christmas holiday, but by day three you are praying for the rapture or death itself. Anyone pray for the rapture during this past Christmas? Family struggles are enough to make all of us pre-tribulational.

We all have somebody in mind.

Let's also identify how NOT to respond to the annoying family member. This quote says it well:

*"Passive boundaries, such as withdrawal, triangulation, pouting, affairs, and passive-aggressive behavior, are extremely destructive to a relationship. Passive ways of showing people that they do not have control over you never lead to intimacy. They never educate the other on who you really are; they only estrange."<sup>1</sup>*

I'm going to guess there is a lot of family estrangement represented here today. We can add sinful responses like bitterness, resentment, hatred, mockery, and others that are certainly responses, just not Christian ones. These leave our most treasured relationships in tatters and this can continue for decades, even life.

Frankly, many of the permanent breaches started as mere annoyances. If we would deal with them rightly on annoyance level, they wouldn't seem insurmountable now. As Charles Spurgeon once said, "It is easier to crush the egg than to kill the serpent." Relational breaches can quickly become way more than they should have ever been. So what does the Bible say about human annoyance?

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Cloud & John Townsend, *Boundaries*, p. 158.

## **The Most Annoying Person in the World is Me**

We may not think that's true, but our theology drives us there. Who are we annoying? Way more than our brother or mother-in-law, we are annoying God. And we could use much stronger words than annoying, like offensive, rebellious, hubris, and sinful.

- *"Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."* (Ephesians 5:6 ESV)
- *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them."* (Romans 1:18-19)

God's orientation toward the natural us apart from grace is offense. We have offended God by our sinful rebellion. If we were to ask God, who on earth annoys you? His answer would be, *Y'all do*. The fact that God loves us still is a measure of his love, not our lovability.

Further, we are all just a short time together away from being annoyed by one another. There isn't one person in the world that if you were to go with them on an extended vacation wouldn't have some quirk or idiosyncrasy or maddening trait you would discover...except the pastoral staff.

That's why people generally practice the 3-day rule. Fish and company get old after three days. Ever have the Griswolds of your family come to stay for a week? What's that like? All the annoying traits are on display by day four. Most of us can hide them for around three days but that's it.

So we are by nature offensive to God and by practice offensive to one another. It's almost like we are all sinners.

Why do you suppose Jesus said, *"by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"*? (John 13:35) An enduring love for a fellow human being that would otherwise annoy and irritate and offend is a sign of something supernatural. What is natural is seeing families at war. What is supernatural is a church family at peace.

## **The Gospel of Jesus Provides Everything We Need to Love Annoying People (And for Them to Love Me)**

How? Simply, agape love and understanding that what God did toward us in Christ dwarfs by an infinite factor any irritation someone else might cause.

*"Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. 'Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down*

*and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:21–35)*

Time doesn't allow much exposition here but I hope you see the point. The one man owed the king a billion dollars and the king forgave him. That same man, having experienced such forgiveness, finds a man who owes him the equivalent of a McDonald's Happy Meal and refuses to give him any grace at all. It doesn't make sense. How can you experience such lavish mercy toward your own debt and then have no mercy toward someone indebted to you?

This is a picture of life with the annoying family member. *"Yes, okay, we will watch again what you want to watch tonight."* That's a 5-dollar debt. OK. No big deal. I wanted something different but you insisted. Next day, *"Do you have to chew your food that loud?"* Next day, *"You told Mom and Dad I did what?"* Next day, *"Who made you princess around here, your Majesty?"* With family, we pick up these little annoyances, these little \$5 debts debts over and over and then after a while, that family member feels like they owe you big time. Without the gospel you end up on Jerry Springer.

As a Christian I must keep in mind as irritating as this person is, I was way more irritating to God and received mercy. I'm the billion dollar debt guy. I owe God a billion dollars. And there is nobody in this world that is ever going to accumulate enough debt against me that is anywhere close to the debt that God forgave me in Christ. So we have to see other people's little debts against us through that grid. Try this next time you are annoyed, think, *it's just a Happy Meal; God forgave me the national debt.*

This is why the quality of our human relationships is an indication of whether we actually believe the gospel or not. *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."* (1 John 4:20) We cannot dismiss our treatment of annoying people as somehow inconsequential to our spiritual lives. We all like less annoying people. Loving the annoying one might be one of our greatest spiritual accomplishments. So what does loving that person look like?

## **Five Strategies for Dealing with an Annoying Family Member**

### **Overlook the annoyance/offense**

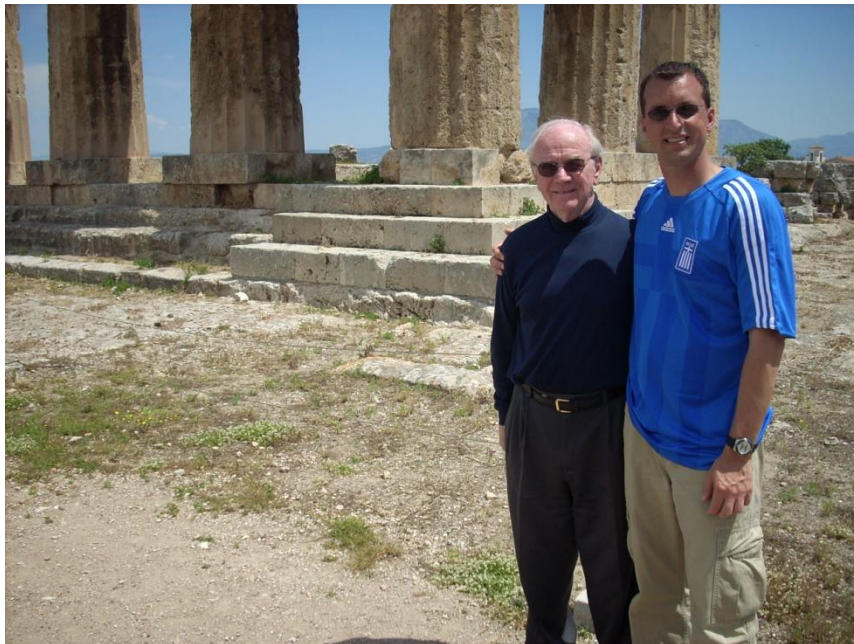
*"Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense."* (Proverbs 19:11)

Proverbs is written to describe practical Christian living. Over the years, this verse has come to my mind regularly as I am deciding whether to be upset about something or not. It is a man's glory to overlook an offense. This is describing a character quality. It's the ability to be magnanimous toward the faults of others. Pettiness magnifies the little faults of others. Every little slight or fault is repeated and nursed into a grudge. But it is a glorious person who overlooks the offense.

As Christians, we have a very real basis for overlooking slights against us. God is the judge, not me. *"I will repay, says the Lord."* (Romans 12:19) It goes on to encourage us to do good to our enemies knowing God will make all things just in the end.

Anger and bitterness come from me refusing to let God settle the score. I want to do it and my irritation, big or small, is my way of making you hurt back. The key is to be hard to annoy. Are you easily annoyed? Don't be "annoyable." How? Overlook it. To overlook is to choose not to look at something anymore. You overlook it.

One man in my life who epitomizes this is Dr. Wilbur Williams (see below, left).



He's a long-time friend. Professor. Archaeologist. We have done several tours of Israel and Greece with him and people from our church. Put 45 people on a bus together for 10 days in a foreign country and there are plenty of offendable moments. I have watched him handle people with such grace. A few years ago, his wife got dementia. She still traveled with him. He told me, "I never want her to feel bad about this. She has loved me so well over the years." He has incredible patience and willingness to personally absorb awkward people and a difficult health crisis. Overlooking is his glory.

### **Ask God to help you to be slow to anger**

We all know how our fuse can get short when we are frustrated. Then any little slight and it's Mt. Vesuvius on Pompeii. God is making us into the likeness of Christ. Jesus, hanging on the cross, completely innocent, prays over his enemies, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* (Luke 23:34) We don't find an angry Savior on the cross.

*"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."* (James 1:19) The culture of all our families would improve if we took a small step this week to be quicker to listen, much slower to speak, and very slow to become angry. A great prayer in the morning is, *God, today, toward my family, help me to be slow to anger.*

## Choose to let love cover it

"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)

We have called this love "stretchy love." Why? Because the Greek word for "covers" has that meaning. How does this work? Imagine you're a rubber band stretching to cover over that irritation [You can see the video of this illustration at 30:06]. See, if you're a Christian, you understand that when Jesus died for you, that was a massive stretch where he covered or atoned for your sins. So he stretched a tremendous amount. That's to the very limit of how far the rubber band will stretch. We get that. We believe that.

But then we go home. And we get irritation, irritation, irritation. And the elasticity of our love for others is shaped by the amazing, forgiving love of God toward us. So we stretch to cover the irritations of others like a rubber band stretching a little bit or maybe a little bit more.

Unless you don't. And then every little irritation is a bomb exploding. If that's the case, do you actually get the massive, stretchy love of God? Maybe that's where you go back to the gospel and say my heart, my love, my relationships, are in no way looking like someone who believes in the gospel of Christ.

So, how stretchy is your love for other people?

The gospel keeps our love elastic by reminding us that the biggest stretch I have ever witnessed is God's stretchy love for my sin. Make sure you keep your love for others elastic by preaching the gospel to your heart every day. *I am the worst sinner I know. Jesus loved me and gave himself for me. God help me to love others like you loved me.*

Who might God be calling you to not simply tolerate, but choose to actively stretch and love? Might it be the annoying person you were thinking of earlier?

## Bear with the annoyance and person

"...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2)

Bearing insinuates weight. We say, "*That is such a burden you bear.*" We bear weighty things. *Bear with one another* isn't describing how to handle the happy times. *Bearing* means there will be times of difficulty and distress. Human relationships, even the best ones, always require a certain level of bearing. Bearing means that we simply put up with it. Get along anyway. Suck it up, Buttercup. I'm bearing with him. I'm bearing with her. Sometimes that's as good as we can do.

Note that it says, "*bearing with one another in love.*" Putting up with it while quietly being resentful isn't biblical bearing. It is bearing *in love*. This means I retain a positive attitude and express positive energy toward the person. Bearing with them isn't being passive aggressive, continuing the relationship while withdrawing emotional intimacy. No. I bear with them in love.

## Accept the annoying person as God has accepted you

If nothing else is working, and you're struggling to overlook, love, and bear with, how about simply accepting them as God has accepted you? "*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*" (Romans 15:7 NIV)

We see here what is really on the line. This isn't about our sense of justice or our right to be mad or annoyed or irritated. When we receive a fellow sinner into our hearts *warts and all*, we are reenacting how Christ accepted us into his heart and salvation *sins and all*. The purpose is "to bring praise to God."

We see here how God is not praised or honored when professing Christians coexist in a state of perpetual annoyance. But when we are amazed that God would love a sinner like me, and that tenderizes my heart to love irritating people, and I accept them for who they are, God is praised by that.

So for all our songs about praising God, your greatest opportunity to bring praise to God might be how you treat your brother the rest of the day. How you bear with your overbearing mother this week. How you respond to your in-laws this week. God is praised in family relationships when they reenact the way Jesus accepted us.

This brings us back to where we tend to always end up. I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior and that reality lived out changes everything about me including my annoyance.

Overlook it. Be slow to anger about it. Remember that stretchy love covers it. Bear with the annoying person in love. And have Jesus-type acceptance for the annoying person, being thankful that Jesus loved me in spite of how dreadfully offensive I was to him.

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