



# *How to Handle Difficulties*

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## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULTIES

Scripture: Ephesians 3:20; John 14:27

How are you getting along with your difficulties? Are they harassing you, dominating you, controlling you, pushing you around, making life miserable for you? Every human being has difficulties, so it is important that we learn how to deal with them.

Marble Collegiate Church is a church that loves people. This is its basic attitude. And it believes its duty and privilege are to help develop strong people, able to meet and deal with the vicissitudes of human existence. Accordingly, it reaches out into our great troubled society to touch all manner and condition of men. For this reason we try to have a message that is directed toward persons as well as social human need. Today, we present a message on how to handle difficulties.

The first way is this, and it is basic: Think creatively.

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about difficulties. When you do that, you come to the conclusion and realization that your difficulty isn't something you want to push aside, something you ought to escape, something you want nothing to do with. Difficulty is in the very nature of things, inherent in the universe. And it is designed for our own good, for people are made strong by struggling with difficulty.

The great Roman thinker Horace seems to have had a high opinion of difficulty. He said, "Difficulties elicit talents that in more fortunate circumstances would lie dormant." Some of the greatest talents in the world have been released from people because somebody was right up against stark human need. Disraeli, British Prime Minister for a number of years during the reign of Queen Victoria, likewise held difficulty in high esteem. In fact he said, "Difficulties constitute the best education in this life." And in case you are still not sold on difficulty, there is another witness, H. G. Wells, who asked, "What on earth would a man do with himself if something did not stand in his way?" The answer is, nothing would ever happen in his life. Without difficulty there is a tendency to grow soft and weak and fat, both in body and in mind.

Have you ever heard the parable of the Penobscot seagulls? Well, these seagulls live in Penobscot Bay, on the Maine Coast, way Down East where men are men and seagulls are seagulls. They have become the most rugged seagulls in the world. And a seagull ought not to be minimized. An old sea captain friend of mine used to say that he had been to Marble Collegiate Church each time he was in New York City. He said, "I have seen Dr. Peale several times. Once a child on board threw something at a seagull. Well, I never saw a man go after anybody as the captain did after that child. He said, 'How dare you ever harm a seagull!' He still clung

to the old notion that every seagull was a reincarnation of the spirit of a departed seaman, and he would stand no monkey business with seagulls around his ship.

Well, at any rate, the Penobscot seagulls struggle in that rugged climate for their food. They really have to fight for mere survival. Then every year they go to Florida for the winter for food is easier to come by down there. It is a long flight, but that toughens their wings, and part of the process.

Now on one occasion, according to the story as the seagulls were flying to Florida a squall drove them off course and forced them down on Conch Island which lies off St. Augustine. There they met southern seagulls who welcomed them in their own manner. They figured that the next day these southern gulls would invite them to share their hunting grounds - or fishing grounds - where they could try their mettle. But when morning came the southern gulls merely sat around, apathetically, waiting. Promptly at 9:15 they called to their northern visitors; they sailed into the air; they flew about a hundred yards and came down by a fleet of shrimp boats. Here they gorged themselves on shrimp that was thrown overboard.

Well, the northern seagulls had never had it so good. Think of it! Food without work! It appealed to them. Just as it appeals to human beings to get what is needed without effort. So they had a glorious winter.

But at the end of the winter season the shrimp boats went away. The southern seagulls knew where to go, but the poor Penobscot seagulls had grown so fat by this time that they couldn't fly back to Maine. Their little ones who had not been taught to struggle for their food, cried piteously and died by the hundreds.

It's a foolish little parable, but something uncomfortably similar has been going on in American society now for about fifty years. This doesn't mean that the poor shouldn't be taken care of. It doesn't mean that compassion shouldn't lead to community services and aid to the needy. Indeed it should. Definitely so. But there has developed in this country a notion to the effect that there is something inherently evil about having to struggle.

Well, I hate to throw an unpleasant note into the meeting, but, friends, you're going to have difficulties until the day you die. The question is: Are you going to be able to meet and overcome them? Maybe we should develop in ourselves that quality of the philosopher which enables a person to find delight in the fact that he has to struggle. What on earth would man do," says Wells, "if some thing did not stand in his way?"

The Bible has something to say about this. The Book of Ephesians, in chapter 3, verse 20, for example, says we should praise God "who is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, or even think of, by means of the power working in us." (I have quoted from the modern English of the new version called *News for Modern Man*.) That is the secret. You can handle any difficulty that will ever face you in this world - I do believe I am not overstating it - if and when you have the power working in you, for then you have an inner force that equates with outer difficulties and you will think creatively about them.

A second step in how to handle difficulty is not to run away from it, not to complain about it, not to wish you didn't have it, but in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ stand up to it. I maintain that if you stand up to your difficulties with the power working within you most diffi-



culties will disintegrate. They cannot overpower anyone who has this mighty power operating in his life.

Perhaps at this point you are counting over your difficulties and wondering if that could be true. Oh I know there are people faced with very poignant difficulties. There surely are. I do not minimize them, nor take them lightly nor superficially. God forbid. But, having said that, I say to you in the name of Jesus Christ that you should stand up to your difficulties, and then your difficulties will no longer stand up to you. It all depends on the power that is within.

On my bookshelves is a volume which I prize highly. It was given to me years ago by a friend in England. It is called *Maxims and Reflections* and contains some of the early speeches of Winston Churchill. Even in his younger days Churchill showed consummate skill in the use of the King's English. And somewhere in this book he mentions a British general by the name of Tudor who was responsible for holding an important sector against the onslaught of the German Army a few weeks before the armistice that ended World War I. What a man can put in a sentence is amazing! This is what Churchill says about Tudor. Probably you never heard of Tudor before; neither had I; but you see the man in this one sentence, a glorious figure. Churchill says his impression of Tudor was of "an iron peg hammered into the frozen ground, immovable." What a sentence! What a man! "An iron peg hammered into the frozen ground, immovable." So the onslaught of the German Army poured itself against him in vain. He simply stood up to it. And what we Americans of today need to do is make of ourselves a citizenship of all colors and conditions of men having the ancient power of the Christian faith, so that we can stand

up to the tumultuous difficulties of our time, both individually and socially, to achieve an outcome that will have value for all men, with equal justice and rights for all.

As a boy I was a great baseball fan, and still am. I loved football and basketball, but personally I'll take big league baseball on a spring or summer day. There's nothing like it. Well, when I was a boy there were two outstanding pitchers. One was Christy Mathewson and the other was Cy Young. Most of you are not old enough to remember either of these men, but I remember them very well. A few years ago I was at a meeting in Cleveland and was introduced to a tall, elderly man addressed as Cy Young. Having watched that magnificent athlete as a boy, I was awestruck. I said, "You're not the Cy Young, are you?"

He simply replied, "I'm Cy Young."

Eager to talk with him, I began, "Young ... "

He interrupted, "Call me Cy."

The idea of calling such a hero by his nickname - Cy for Cyclone - stopped me for an instant, but I finally did.

"If I understand correctly, your pitching record was the greatest made by anybody in your day."

"That's right," he said. He was not what you would call unduly modest.

Then I asked him, "What do you think of the pitchers of today?"

"Some of these boys are pretty good," he answered,

"but some are not made of the stuff we were." Of course, the older generation always thinks that anyway. But he continued, "Now a modern pitcher - suppose he pitches the whole game, what do they do? They give him four days' rest before he pitches again. Why, in my day they kept us pitching! Many a time I pitched the whole game

three afternoons straight."

Then he continued, "And when one of these modern pitchers gets into trouble the manager rushes out, the other players close in, they hold a conference and ask him how he is. Then maybe they take him out and put somebody else in. Sometimes they'll put in three or four pitchers in one game. In my day when you were pitching and you got into trouble the manager never even came out. He just sat there with his face turned away from you. You were absolutely on your own. The only thing you could do," he said - and I think this phrase is a classic, "was to pitch your way out of trouble. And they left you there until you did."

"But," I said, "a pitcher's either in form or off his form, isn't he? What about when you were off your form?"

"Why, that's easy," Cy Young replied. "You just kept pitching until you got back in form."

I have no doubt that if the Lord were preaching His Gospel in the towns, villages and cities of the United States of America He would use illustrations from the great field of sport. My intention in telling of Cy Young and his dynamic words on pitching your way out of trouble and pitching your way back into form is simply to remind you of a fact: You're a man or you're a woman, and above all you're a Christian and you have within you from Almighty God the power to overcome all difficulties. So lift up your prayer of thanksgiving to Him who gives you more than you "can ever ask for, or even think of," through the power working in you.

The final thing in handling difficulty and again this is quite simple - is to remain calm and believe in the guidance of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do those two things

and, as far as difficulties concerned, you've started a solution. But it is not easy to remain calm. Sometimes life throws the whole book at you and you think, Why in the world does everything go wrong for me all at one time? That is an interesting philosophical and psychological question. But many times that is the way it is.

Now the tendency when you feel overwhelmed with difficulties is to panic. And panic is very dangerous, for when you panic your mind becomes hot and feverish. The mind will think clearly only when it is cool. When the mind is agitated, it is disturbed, like the surface of the sea, and the deeper intimations from the subconscious depths cannot come through to take charge of the situation. So you must keep calm. And Jesus helps you to keep calm. "Peace I give to you," He said.

I was in my study at the church one day and my secretary, who was sitting beside me, called me on the intercom and said "A woman has walked in here who seems to be in great trouble. She has no appointment. She just wants to see the minister of the church and she's standing outside."

Well," I said, "I've got a deadline on this article I'm writing."

"I know you have, but this woman really seems to be in trouble."

"So you think I'd better see her?"

Yes, although she's not my type."

What do you mean, 'my type'?" This interested me, and I said, "Send her in."

I walked this woman - and she was of a type, no doubt about it. She was extraordinarily old and came in trailing a combined aroma of tobacco, liquor and perfume.



Her face was composed in the standard sophisticated urban mask. And she acted embarrassed. She said, "Isn't this something! being in the office of a minister! Think what my friends would say if they could see me here!"

And I thought to myself, "What my friends would say if they could see me?" Well, I asked, "What can I do for you?"

"Oh," she sighed, "I'm in terrible trouble."

"Tell me about it. This is a confidential relationship. You just tell me anything that is on your mind. Just be at ease."

Then she started to talk. It was deep, dark human and tragedy and sin and failure and everything mixed together. "I haven't been inside a church in I could tell you how many years. I have been walking the streets this morning absolutely desperate. As I came by this church the thought came to me, 'Go in and see the minister. Maybe he'll be a kindly, understanding man.'"

"We try to be," I said.

As she continued to pour out her story, the sophisticated mask seemed to fall away and I saw before me a little girl, a troubled little girl, reaching out pathetically for help. It took her fifteen, maybe twenty minutes to tell her story. Then came that compulsive, neurotic thing which often happens in people who are in trouble: she immediately wanted to tell it all over again like a defective phonograph record when the needle gets stuck in a groove. The same phrases are repeated over and over again. You have to stop going over old trouble after the first time because if you don't it is not exorcised, it is just driven deeper into consciousness so that it can't actually take place.

"Look now, stop," I said. "You've told me everything."

"Haven't you?"

"Yes," she said, "I have."

"You have three big difficulties, haven't you?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Well," I asked her, "do you think you could keep absolutely silent for two or three minutes and not say a word?" I had my doubts, but she said she could. "All right," I told her, "here is what we are going to do. Put these three difficulties aside, forget all about them. Let us sit here together and spend two to three minutes thinking about Jesus Christ- nothing else."

This is a great technique for diverting from the problem to the power - after which you come back to the problem with power. I asked, "Do you believe in Jesus?"

A smile lighted her face as she said, "Oh, yes, I do indeed. My mother used to tell me about Jesus."

"I have been a very good girl; I've wandered away and haven't had anything to do with Him in a long time, but I love Him."

"Jesus is big hearted and kind. He knows you wandered away from Him, but wherever His children are, whether they act right toward Him or not, He loves them and hopes they'll come back to Him. You have come into this church this morning. Let us sit here now for three minutes thinking of Him."

Thus we sat, thinking of Jesus. When finally I broke the silence I asked her what her thoughts had been.

"Well," she said, "a line out of an old song I used to sing in Sunday School came to me. I haven't thought of it for years. Jesus loves me. This I know. For the Bible tells me so."

The woman was suddenly peaceful; she was quiet and able to think. "Take these difficulties one at a time," I

suggested. With the power that Jesus will give you, you'll get an answer and a solution." And she did, in a wonderful manner. So can you, in an equally wonderful way.

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for the glory and the greatness, the joy and the happiness, the laughter and the victory of the Christian religion. Help us to remember the truth that we must have a proper philosophy of difficulty, that we can draw upon the inner strength which comes from Thee to stand up to our difficulties and calmly overcome them through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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