

How to Find Comfort Knowing You Can't Change People

The unchanging person is the loving caregiver's greatest struggle. You love them and want to help them. You pour out your heart for them. But they do not change. Sometimes you push too hard. Other times, you give up. Knowing how to respond to each individual is a wisdom issue, but being a restful soul is non-negotiable for all of them. Are you a restful soul as you think about the person you love so much but is not changing?

A Discippler's Dilemma

So there you are. You are sitting near the rim of the Grand Canyon, watching an angry, hurt, confused, but determined group of people file by you. One by one. All of them are blindfolded. They walk up to the edge and over the rim, plummeting to the bottom.

You are sitting and watching. Each day comes, the stories are different, but the result is the same. What do you do? Yell? Warn? Appeal? Cry? Plead? Depending on the situation and the individual you're serving, you make your appeals, whatever they may be. But to no avail.

I have just described to you the dilemma of every disciple-maker who loves unchanging people and would find no greater joy than to see them change. These caregivers care. They want to help, but they are keenly aware of their human limitations as well as their unique call that does not include changing people.

What Can You Do?

I cannot recollect how many times I have found myself in this unwanted position. I had spoken with hundreds of people who had determined to do what they wanted to do, even though the objective evidence before them was a warning not to proceed. I'm sure you have your stories too.

You counsel. You warn. You plead. And you watch them fall into situations that most of them come to regret. You have to live in the tension of loving a fellow fallen person while recognizing that God has not called you to change anyone. All believers who want to see others have better lives have to learn how to find rest in their limitations.

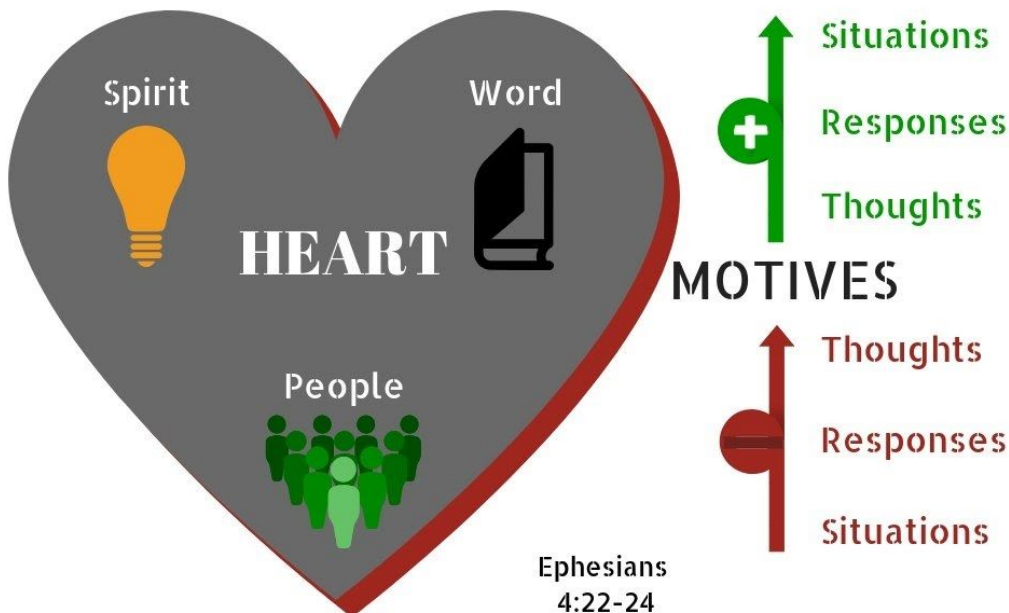
One of my first counseling sessions many years ago was like this. [Biff] was his name. Biff was a middle-aged man, overweight, and recently fired. His wife was on the verge of leaving him. Their children were in full-rebellion mode, and his landlord was evicting them. Biff was also head-over-heels in debt.

The World According to Biff

He sat in front of me, with his briefcase beside his chair and a card Rolodex in his hand. He had walked to my office from his job, where his employer had fired him earlier that day. He walked because he had no transportation and no friends to give him a ride. But it gets worse.

Biff sat there, blaming the world for his problems. His wife was a nag, according to Biff. He added that his children were a nuisance. And, as you can imagine, his employer was wrong to let him go. Biff was like a man who had eaten a garden of bitter herbs. Everything out of his mouth had a taint of sourness as he spewed his negativity, rationalizations, justifications, and victimhood all over my office.

THE TARGET OF CHANGE



Biff clearly articulated where all the problems were; they were all “out there” surrounding him while pressing the life out of him. I sat there, thinking that the issues were not that far away. They were just behind his short, stubby-wide necktie with a food stain on it. His primary problems were in his heart, not in his world. He was looking so intently at what others had done to him that he could not address what was happening fifteen inches below his mouth. His head and heart were at war against each other, which was the cause of his confusion.

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (James 1:14-15).

Biff listened to what I had to say, but he rejected all of it—at least outwardly. I have no idea what he thought in reality. Perhaps he agreed or partly agreed to what I was saying. I don't know. But what I do know is that he went home unwilling to change or continue the discussion.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1-2).

You Care With a Broken Heart

As I paced the floor, sharing Biff's story with Lucia, the tears began to flow. I had an answer for him. There was a solution. My ideas were not my plan for his life, but one much better. They were practical steps, outlined in God's Word, that would help Biff change. But he refused to listen. It was at that moment that I realized I would not last long in my new profession. I had recently become the lead trainer and counselor at my local church.

No matter how hard I tried or cried, I could not fix Biff. He was determined to jump into the abyss while blaming everyone around him for his problems. It was at that moment when the Lord broke through my proud heart. Yes, it's a heart with traces of pride that thinks it can change

anyone. You can tell when you cross that line when a person's unchanging ways begin to manage your emotions.

It was at that juncture when the kindness of God interrupted my thinking by reminding me that I was not the savior of the world or any individual. I stopped the mental, emotional train that was taking me to some wrong places and reminded myself of an age-old fact: we have a Savior. His name is Jesus.

Sweet relief began to flood my soul.

When You Cross the Line

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

It became clear to me that Biff would be representative of a lot of people that I would meet in my future. Some people do not want to change. Others choose to change long after you meet with them. Then some will never change no matter what you say or do for them.

It is not your job to change people. Your job is to care for and disciple with *compassion*, *competence*, *courage*, and *care*, as you rest in the expectant hope that God will *change* that person. You will know if you're not resting in Christ if any of the following things begin to characterize how you think and talk about the unchanging person.

- **Gossip** – You share the person's problem with other folks who are not part of the solution.
- **Slander** – You make false statements about the person you're trying to help.
- **Criticize** – You talk negatively about the person to others.
- **Fear** – You overthink about their problems or the possibilities of what could happen if they don't change.
- **Impatience** – You're tired of meeting with them because there is no evidence of change.
- **Apathy** – You don't care any longer, so you're dismissive and unsympathetic toward them.

- **Lack of pity** – Their issues do not make you biblically sad.

There are more, and I'm sure you can add a few, but you get the idea. When a person's lack of change begins to control your heart, your mouth will reveal those inner thoughts. You need to address them immediately, or you will develop sinful habits.

Know Your Job and Stick To It

Changing anyone is a pay grade higher than the responsibility the Lord has given to us. Change is His job, not ours. You and I are in the Lord's army, carrying His water and seed, providing it for whosoever will. We're always "on the prowl," planting wherever we go while praying and waiting on the good Lord to bring growth.

It was that night, only a few hours since my encounter with Biff, that I removed the comma after the word "watered" in Paul's verse. Then I inserted a period right there, as a reminder that I have to stop just after *planting* and *watering*. It is the Lord who provides the *growth*.

How about you? Where do you typically stop when caring for others? Perhaps it would be more instructive to answer that question by evaluating how you think and respond to those you love the most. Typically, it's not those whom we have no history with that trip us up. But it's those with whom we've invested blood, sweat, and tears with who tempt us to cross the line and become "Mini-Messiahs."

Call to Action

The way you will know if you have crossed that line with someone is by how you think and talk about them. If you do cross that line with them, you will have become their mini-messiah—the person who is trying to mandate a change in their lives. This mistake is enormous.

If you persist in trying to force, coerce, or manipulate a person to change, you will more than likely ruin that relationship. Here are a few ways you can test yourself to see if you have crossed the line with them. Each thought begins with "I have crossed the line when:"

- I become impatient with a person who is not changing.
- I gossip about them to others, talking about what a problem they are.
- I over-worry about what will happen to them (or me) if they do not change.

- I live in anxiousness when thinking about them.
- I become frustrated with them because they will not change.
- I become demanding toward them.
- I feel the weakening of my faith in God because the unchanging person is not meeting my “change expectations.”

Are you tempted to be a mini-messiah? If so, how do you need to change? What is wrong with you that motivates you to attempt to take the Lord’s work from Him? Why is trusting this person to the Lord hard for you to do?