

# “I’ve Had it with You!” Learning to Be Tender When People are Tough



By William P. Smith

I stood in the middle of the living room in my pajamas, fists tightly clenched, as chaos ruled my house unopposed. What is it that drives little children to conspire to interrupt their parent’s sleep nearly every hour in the same night? And why is it that their reasons for doing so become increasingly suspect as the night wears on? I met the first few interruptions with some decent semblance of kindness, but whatever graces I had at 2:37 a.m. were nonexistent by 6:53 a.m. I woke up in a foul mood and knew that greater depths of hostility lurked beneath the surface of my heart. To top it off, the kids woke early and rambunctiously, making it impossible to even consider going back to sleep. All I wanted was to give them a piece of my mind and leave them cowering—quietly—in separate corners. I was mad enough to spit nails, bite heads off, see red. Pick your favorite expression for being nearly out of control and I was there.

I’ve learned over the years that when I’m *that* upset, something is dangerously wrong with me no matter what else is going on outside of me. The problem in me is greater than the problems around me. Therefore, before I can even consider dealing with others I have to first deal with the ugliness in myself. I’ve also

learned that I need to be honest with my own thoughts and not try to deceive myself into looking better than I am. So before I unleashed the demons straining to get out, I stood in the living room silently praying, “Father, I know my biggest problem right now is me, not the kids ... but I don’t believe it. What I really believe is that if these kids would get their act together, I’d be just fine. Please help me.”

And in that moment God answered my prayer. I found myself remembering—the Holy Spirit does bring truth to our minds—the time when God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 32. Moses had been up there with God for forty days. The Israelites, getting anxious at the foot of the mountain, insisted that Aaron, the high priest designate, make gods to lead them. Given what God had just told Moses about not making graven images, they could not have asked for anything worse, but Aaron gave in to their demand. Before Moses went up to meet God, the Israelites had wholeheartedly agreed to God’s covenant, declaring, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Then they had a meal to celebrate the covenant. The elders ate and drank in the presence of God!<sup>1</sup> But just forty days later, His people held another celebration meal—this one with their new idol. This second meal violated the earlier one that God had sanctioned. When

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<sup>1</sup> Ex. 24:1-11.

God saw the people's actions, He responded by saying to Moses (slightly paraphrased), "Step aside; I'm going to wipe them out!"

That was the mental image I had as I wrestled—3500 years later—with my ungodly anger at being kept awake all night. But there was a big difference between my response and Moses'. Moses immediately interceded for the people. I, however, would have cheered, "Yeah, God, go for it! Let's start over!"

That contrast shook me up. Godly conviction over my reaction settled in. My anger at my kids began seeping away as I saw my own failings. It became terribly clear that I do not bear long with others. I am less moved by their plight when they are trapped in their problems than I am concerned with how those problems affect me. I only care about their best interests if my life remains relatively unaffected. Let's face it, if my love and patience last less than eight hours because of something minor like noisy children and interrupted sleep, then how will I possibly be able to reach out and care for someone who actually sins against me for eight weeks? Eight months? Eight years? I have a calling to be involved in other people's lives to benefit them—to minister to them—even when they irritate me or sin against me.

Ministry—helping others be reconciled with God—requires that I be moved by the danger someone else has put himself into, even when that person is doing something I don't like. Moses responded differently than I did because he knew something that I am struggling to learn. He knew that if the Israelites were willing to turn their backs on God and worship a golden idol, then their biggest problem was not how they affected him, but how they affected God. He knew that their actions required someone to speak for them before God or they would be destroyed. Someone needed to step in on their behalf and rescue them. And that is the crucial need of the sinful, confused and unhappy people you and I encounter as well. That means that learning how to minister to sinners, when all you want to do is get away from them, is a crucial life skill for you and me.

### ***Difficult, Stubborn People***

Moses' response to the people of God was amazing. His ministry on their behalf was not a

natural response at all. Let's take another moment to realize how high Moses set the bar. I was only dealing with minor irritations. But Moses was dealing with rebellion—and rebellion that had a long history. The Israelites had the best possible situation and they squandered it. God proved how much He loved them when He devastated Egypt to set them free. He cared for them—although they were nothing but a rag-tag collection of demoralized slaves. He kept His promise to their fathers that they would be His people. After rescuing them, he stayed committed to His relationship with them and kept that commitment for over 400 years! But the Israelites could not even keep their commitment for forty days.

The Israelites demonstrated a core commitment to their own pleasures and fears at the base of Sinai. They were a wayward and stubborn people. God called them "stiff necked" and Moses declared that they had "been rebellious against the Lord from the first day I knew you."<sup>2</sup> That was a strong but accurate indictment. In different ways, the Israelites showed contempt for Moses as God's hand-picked deliverer and for God Himself. No sooner had God delivered them out of Egypt then they immediately accused Him of intending to kill them at the Red Sea. Later they sang the same refrain when they claimed God was trying to starve them to death and when they feared dying of thirst in the wilderness. They were unpleasant, tiresome people who didn't catch on quickly; who didn't ever seem to catch on. If change were taking place, you would have needed a micrometer to measure it! God's chosen people did not act like a prized possession. They were an incredibly unfaithful, hard-headed bunch. Ministering to them must have been unbearably frustrating.

### ***We Are Like the Israelites!***

But before we risk looking down on the Israelites, let's realize that they are not all that different from the rest of us. I know they're not all that different from me. Aren't most of the people you know like that? Some people are more aggressive in the ways they sin against us. Others are more passive. But change—real,

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<sup>2</sup> Deut. 9:13; Ex. 33:5; Deut. 9:24.

lasting change—tends to be slow for everyone. Even when we start to change, we are erratic. A short fuse takes a long time to lengthen. Patience is learned over decades. It can take years for truth-telling to encompass the slight omissions and shadings of truth, as well as the outright lies.

The fact that change takes place over time is easier to recognize when we look at ourselves. Why is it that I so quickly discount my own defensiveness? Sure, I know it shuts down conversations and makes for prickly interactions with my family and friends. But the fact that I wrestle with my own defensiveness so little and so sporadically is pretty clear evidence that I take the problem rather lightly—even forgetting it's a problem! I doubt those around me take the problem as lightly as I do. In other words, they live knowing that my refusal to grapple with my defensiveness makes it even harder for them to live with me. I add an additional frustration to my friends and family by piling on the excess stress of caring so little to change for their sakes. They not only have to deal with my

other reactions that come a whole lot more quickly than ministry responses.

How about lashing out in anger? That is a pretty common response when you have tried to do what is good for someone and he or she completely ignores your help. Threatening, bullying and manipulating are all close cousins of lashing out in anger. This is "I've had it with you!" in Technicolor and surround-sound.

How about complaining or grumbling? Moses could have easily done that. After all, he didn't want this job in the first place. He had *told* God that, but God insisted anyway. What a tailor-made situation for feeling sorry for himself! Better yet, he could toss all the blame on God for being unhappy with the life he was stuck with. You can probably sympathize on some level. Who asked for the personalities of the kids you have? Why did your spouse develop all those annoying habits *after* you married him? And what was God thinking when He allowed that wonderful neighbor to move away, only to be replaced with someone whose highly audible nocturnal habits

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## The ultimate in "I've had it with you!" is when you stop caring altogether about the other person.

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defensiveness, which is bad enough, they also have to deal with my apathy toward this character defect. I make it much harder for people to live with me than it has to be.

We might wish for quick change in ourselves and others. But the reality is that long-standing relational patterns change exceedingly slowly. That's not to say they *can't* change more quickly. God's resources are more than adequate to change any person. Sadly, it is often an issue of the person not seeing the need or not wanting to change. And that lack of change in others now places an additional requirement on your life. You will respond to them in some way. The question is how? Will you engage them with their best interests in mind or will you attempt to reduce the way they affect you? How will you handle the reality that others can be difficult to live with? Will you quit and give up? Will you lose control and blow up? When you think about it, there are a number of

demonstrate he can't tell the difference between day and night! Clearly a willingness to grumble inwardly or to be sour in speaking about someone else to anyone who will listen is an indication that "I've had it with you!" for quite awhile.

Another common response is to ignore irritating people. The ultimate in "I've had it with you!" is when you stop caring altogether about the other person. While being angry with someone produces unpleasant feelings, it at least expresses that you care enough to get powerfully upset with them. I tend to get more upset with people that I love the most. What they do matters to me. One of the signs that I don't love someone is that I am unaffected by what they do or don't do. In this way, indifference—not noticing whether another person even exists—is the number one indicator of real hatred, of true unconcern.

Those responses strike me as much more

normal or natural for Moses as he met with God on the mountain. He didn't ask for this position. He slaved away for the Israelites in ways that were personally upsetting and inconvenient. In addition, these people were not lovable—they were uneducated, uncultured, and radically unwilling to change. They didn't bring anything positive to the table! It would have been so easy to justify any response that prevented him from sticking his neck out for them. That would have been natural.

Moses, however, demonstrated something *supernatural*. He put his own comfort level second to the need of God's people. He looked beyond the sinful irritations of the Israelites to the danger they were in and he cared about their plight. He cared when it would have been easier not to care. Ministry was not natural, but at that point, it was *the* crucial need of the Israelites. If someone did not step up to intercede with God for them, they were literally doomed. Without ministry, they would have been destroyed. Do you think that way when others are misbehaving? In the words of Hebrews 5:2, do you deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray? The Israelites had someone like that in their time of need, and for them that meant the difference between life and death.

### **Ministry is Costly**

But what is it like to try to help stubborn, wayward people? Are they happy to receive your care? Do they quickly see their need? Are they grateful for your concern and sacrifice, your careful listening, your best attempt at wise counsel?

No.

These are precisely the people who need ministry the most. But those who most need help are the ones who least recognize their need. And they are not the ones I most quickly try to help. I prefer helping people who are interesting, self-aware and fun to be around—you know, people who least need the help! I prefer helping people who realize they need help. Why is that? They make me feel pretty good and require little from me. Do you see the deceitfulness of sin here? Do you see how *hard* it is to be “redemptive” in your way of living life? Although I'm no prize myself,

I prefer to hang out with “the beautiful people!” But those who are *not* beautiful—the ones just like me—are really the ones I am called to care for.

Ministry involvement with the Israelites had unpleasant implications. First, Moses inserted himself right in between God's hot displeasure and the people making Him angry. That is perhaps the most dangerous place to be in the entire universe. Have you noticed that when you insert yourself between an angry person and the object of his anger that his focus shifts? Now he's mad at you! That's exactly what's taking place on Mount Sinai. God is justly angry with the Israelites, and has decided to destroy all of them, but Moses jumps in the middle! If you're watching this interchange from the sidelines you're tempted to shout, “Be careful Moses! You're in a very dangerous spot!” Clearly Moses is not acting in his own best interests. Something else moves him so strongly that he jeopardizes his own well-being.

Second, ministry to the Israelites was not only dangerous in the present; it invited future grief. If God relents, Moses will be stuck with this group for a lot longer! And most likely they will blow it again ... and again ... and again. Moses couldn't count on solving their problems with this one redemptive, loving intervention.

That's the thing about ministry, isn't it? Moses did all the right things and it still did not guarantee godliness in the people. How many parents have said with tears, “We did everything we were supposed to do and look how she turned out? What went wrong?” We hope our actions will produce immediate, positive results. That's a good desire. But passages like this show that our decision to help someone cannot be based upon our desired outcomes. If that were the case, most of the prophets, including Moses, would never have uttered a word. Because he intervened this time, Moses would have to do so again.

Interceding for rebels is not a one-time thing. The Israelites remained extremely difficult people to work with. Their grumbling and fearfulness are well known. Not only did their complaining kill most of them, it eventually provoked Moses to do something that kept *him* out of the earthly Promised Land.

Ministry will cost you—in ways you can't

anticipate. So, why did Moses extend himself for the Israelites when there seem to be so many good reasons to let them reap what they sowed? What will move you to move toward others when they have sinned against you—or just disappointed you—for the umpteenth time? What can change you to counteract the desires to avoid others or to rage at them?

### **Motivation Improbable**

Moses never once talked to God about how wonderful or winsome the children of Israel were.<sup>3</sup> Instead he talked to God about God. He recalled that *God* brought the people out and redeemed them. He recalled that *God* swore by Himself, “I will give this land to the descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” Moses prayed, “God, if You now destroy the Israelites, the Egyptians will legitimately say that You either wanted to kill them or You were unable to bring them into the land You promised.” In other words, “God, Your reputation is on the line. Your power and Your character will be

human interactions. We quit caring for a spouse if we think he or she won’t respond to our kindness. We ignore children when all they express is one more “gimme.” We clothe ourselves in self-pity, anger and despair when other people don’t respond the way we’d like them to. And in doing so, we too easily forget that every human encounter has a primary audience of ONE. Moses did not forget. He risked his life and happiness to speak on behalf of people who really needed him to speak for them - and who didn’t even know it yet. He was concerned that God’s glory not be compromised. Here’s a place to pause for a moment. If God’s glory became your number one concern, how would it change the way you interact in situations that drive you right up a wall? How would it help you resist the temptation to ignore difficult situations? How would you speak differently? What would you do differently?

Moses demonstrated a deep compassion for the people. He was able to connect God’s

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questioned if You destroy Your people.” Was Moses concerned about his own personal agenda and comfort? No. Was he sentimental about the Israelites? No. He was most concerned with God’s reputation. He wanted this mess to be resolved in a way that reflected well on God. In theological shorthand, he was concerned for God’s glory.

How often is God’s reputation even a factor in your interpersonal conflicts? Is this the first thing on your mind when your coworker steals your idea and runs to the boss ... again? Is it the first thing on your mind when you catch your husband with pornography ... again? Is it the first thing when the kids initiate World War III ... again? Is it the tenth thing? Fiftieth?

I am afraid that God’s glory in the middle of adverse times means far too little to me and to the people I know. It is easy to respond to others as though only humans are involved in

glory to the plight that they’d gotten themselves into. Moses remembered that if God did not relent, the only thing awaiting Israel was disaster. We are not told why Moses had compassion for these obstinate people, but surely he himself was familiar with the same failings that drove them. Remember his early attempt at liberating the Israelites that resulted in a dead Egyptian, in the Israelites being afraid of him, and in his running away? Or how about when God later told him to go speak to *Pharaoh* and instead Moses *stayed* and spoke to *God*, suggesting that God find someone else? And don’t forget when he blamed God for making the Israelites’ burdens heavier after his first interview with Pharaoh. Here was a man who was acquainted with faithlessness, both the presumptive variety and the wilting, intransigent type. He knew something of the failings of being human and he had learned something of God’s mercy and redeeming work in a person. When I am fed up with other

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<sup>3</sup> See Ex. 32 and the parallel passage in Deut. 9.

people I find it helpful to ask God, "Where do I do the same thing to you that this person is doing to me?" *Invariably* the Holy Spirit helps me see the parallels in my own life. He drives me to seek God's forgiveness. I *need* His mercy and patience and help. In receiving love, I am changed so that I extend that same care to others.

### ***Wanted: Intercessors!***

In some ways Exodus 32 is not only a scary passage, but an odd one as well. God was about to destroy his people! That's scary. God changed His mind? That's odd. With all the confusing fog that surrounds that last question, something crucial can be missed. We tend to ask questions about God's *nature* while forgetting that God only chooses to reveal things about Himself in the context of his real-time *relationships* to other persons. The text doesn't try to answer the question of God changing His mind as though God were abstracted from people, off floating in a vacuum by Himself. Instead, God's relenting took place within an interpersonal framework. In this case God relented after listening to Moses, who (as it happens to turn out), is *the* very person God had appointed to lead His people. More succinctly, God appointed the intercessor He was willing to hear. This says things about God that are far more powerful and significant than an abstract debate about whether or not He changed His mind. If there were no one to intercede, God really would have destroyed the people—He was not playing a game with Moses. The people truly were in terrible danger. Yet God had already provided the person to handle the problem that Israel's sin produced when it contacted His own holiness. The passage shows us God's heart for His people. He provided someone to intercede on their behalf. If you miss this larger context, God looks like He doesn't know what's going to happen and isn't running His own universe. He also looks unreasonable—like some cosmic bully on the verge of losing control. The passage does not downplay the explosive combination of a holy God with heinous evil. Instead it *uses* that background to highlight the intercessor appointed by this same merciful God. Moses was the intercessor who was able to stand

effectively between God and the objects of His anger, on their behalf, at God's merciful initiative.

This event is not unique in God's dealings with humanity. Abraham performed a similar role when he argued for the righteous who might be living in Sodom and Gomorrah. Aaron later interceded for the people when God sent a plague against them, standing between the living and the dead so that the plague stopped.<sup>4</sup> God not only doesn't mind having people intercede, He goes out of His way to make sure intercession happens. He is under no obligation to track down humans and tell them His plans to punish or to discipline, as though He needed either permission or approval. Yet He seeks such encounters anyway. He appoints certain people to stand between Him and those on whom His anger is about to fall.

God is wonderful in appointing Moses to intercede and the result of that is wonderful for the people. But in this case it does not last. Indeed, it cannot. Eventually the people proved too much for Moses. He later struck the rock angrily after God told him to speak mercifully. He disqualified himself from entering the Promised Land. Here is where I completely identify with Moses. He finally got fed up with the people and was no longer interested in God's glory. He simply wanted the complaining to end.

He was not alone. Aaron had failed hideously as a leader at Mount Sinai. He never got to the Promised Land either. Abraham was anything but spotless—he died hoping for the promise. Despite God's provision of intercessors, all the ones He appointed had their own serious failings. Nothing captures God's combined desire and disappointment better than Ezekiel 22:30: "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap on behalf of the land so that I would not have to destroy it, but I found none." God did not delight in destroying the people or the land. Instead He longed for someone to build up His people and intercede for them. He longed for someone to minister to them. But He did not find the person who could satisfy His desire.

As we track through the Old Testament

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<sup>4</sup> Num. 16:48.

we keep looking forward to the One who will be able to stand in the gap on our behalf and intercede for us, without needing His own intercessor. We need Him. We need Him for our own failings and we need Him when we refuse to minister to others in their failings. But we don't find such a person ... until Jesus. And then God supplies all we need.

That means that you are not alone in the difficult times with difficult people. Jesus is praying for you.

Did you get that? *Jesus is praying for you.*

This is not some well-meaning counselor sending up a quick prayer. This is not a friend who asked for your help last week with his own sins. This is not someone on the outskirts of the power circles in heaven. This is JESUS, the Father's own Son. This is the chosen One who is functioning now in His appropriate and ordained role. Do you think His intercession will be fruitless? Do you think that somehow, His intercession for you to seek God's glory in the middle of conflict will not be answered?

like mad to win. You either seek safety or moral superiority. Only recognizing the vertical dimension of God's presence can help you avoid the choices of fight or flight. Only that vertical reality can move you to help a person you don't even like.

The situation is even better when the other participants also belong to Christ. Not only is Jesus interceding for you, but He also intercedes for them. He is invested in changing *both* of us in the encounter. In fact, He gave His life to ensure that change will take place. However, it is so easy for me to look at someone and assume that he will always be exactly what I hate about him in the moment. She will always have a thinly veiled temper. He will always be a whiner. She will always see a dark cloud attached to every silver lining. He will always be manipulative, complaining, jealous, and insecure. She will never change. Those false assumptions flatly deny what the Holy Spirit does in people. And they echo my own faithless heart that doesn't want to be bothered

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## I must remember that God works out His plans even through conflict.

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That won't happen. It can't. It might not look exactly like what you wanted, but you can be well satisfied that what Jesus asks of the Father will most certainly take place. If you are going to enter the lives of irritating and rebellious people with ministry on your mind, you must have absolute confidence in somebody besides yourself. You are not alone in that situation. That somebody else has ministry on His mind. Not only did He intercede with our Father while He was on earth, but He continues that ministry even today, at this very moment.<sup>5</sup> That active, ongoing intercession is exactly what I need when I feel my anger swelling out of control. It is also what my family needs when they are out of control.

What's the alternative to recognizing Jesus' present, active involvement in your conflicts? When you do not live knowing that Christ intercedes for you, you respond as though only people are involved. Horizontal conflicts tend to lead you either to run away or to fight

to love others. I forget—"Of course you will not always be what I hate or fear or get tired of. Some day you'll be radiant with unbelievable glory!" I find it so easy to forget that. Not only do I need to remember the benefits of Christ's work for me, I also need to remember that His benefits extend to all of His people; even those I personally find too irritating, intimidating or hopeless for words. Paul's confidence that Christ will bring to completion what He started refers to *other* people, not his own personal assurance!<sup>6</sup>

Especially in difficult interpersonal collisions, I must remember that God works out His plans even through conflict. That doesn't mean things work out perfectly in a matter of minutes. God would again speak of destroying all the Israelites when they rebelled against his command to enter Canaan. And again Moses would step into the breach to speak on their behalf.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes God's plans to change

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<sup>5</sup> Heb. 4:14-5:10.

<sup>6</sup> Phil. 1:6.

<sup>7</sup> Num. 14.

people require going through similar scenarios several times. But His plans to redeem—rescue and change—His people really do take place. It just doesn't always happen on my time-table or according to my plan. In fact, God's plans for other people's lives often mean my life is more difficult than I'd like.

### ***Developing Ministry Motivation***

So how do you cultivate a lifestyle of ministry when that cuts against the grain of your own self-interest?

First, take stock of your typical way of handling difficult people.

- Do you attempt to control them with your anger, bitterness or coldness?
- Do you try to mollify others and get away from them as quickly as possible?
- Do you use humor or sarcasm to deflect other's anger?
- Do you smell trouble a mile off and work to avoid it before it finds you?
- Do you send others to do your dirty work?
- Think carefully before continuing. If none of these describe you, how do you respond?

Becoming ministry-minded involves learning which failures of love move you away from ministry. Having some sense of your natural reactions prepares you to fight the desires that will tempt you away from ministry. Such knowledge allows you to repent and ask the Lord to fill you instead with a desire to honor him and to be concerned for others.

Second, deal with your failure to move toward people. Ask Jesus to give you the desire to hang in there with difficult people the way He does with you. It helps me to realize that God also gets frustrated with people and their slowness to trust Him. But that knowledge leads me immediately to repent, since that means I'm one of those people who also frustrates Him many times. That experiential knowledge of His kindness in dealing with my failings gives me more gentleness and humility in caring for others. I also relearn that God's frustration leads Him to act to bring good to his people and not harm. His frustration leads Him to appoint an intercessor who removes the problem that required the intercession in the first place!

Third, take a moment to make a list of the

frustrating people God has placed in your life. Ask Him to renew your desire to love those who are unlovable. Ask Him to help you see the ways you are just like them, needing *His* grace, patience and forgiveness as much as they need yours. Ask Him to move your heart to compassion for them as you consider the ways they work to ruin their own lives, both with you and Him. Compassion is what moved our Lord to rescue you. Ask Him for the same compassion to overcome your first reactions to the people on your list.

Fourth, distinguish between irritations that arise from sin and those that result from the collision of lifestyle or personality differences. What a revelation it's been to understand that not everything that bothers me is actually wrong! Sometimes children are just up all night and exuberant in the morning. Sometimes a colleague's forgetfulness is unintentional. Sometimes when a church member speaks her mind strongly it is not harshness or belligerence. Sometimes—perhaps many times?—I am simply too quick to take others' actions and words personally. It is as if I believe that everything others think or do is calculated to affect me in some way! To my shame I respond far too many times as though I am the primary focus of myself *and* of the other person. Honestly, the reality is that most of the time, people are just not thinking about me at all. This is easier for me to handle than thinking they are out to get me. What compels me to believe that everyone thinks about me as constantly as I do? I envy those who seem oblivious to what others think about them. I find I do better in relationships when I focus much less on me and more on those around me.

Fifth, pick someone from the list you made under step three to pray for. Move your prayers beyond yourself and intercede for the sake of that other person. Again Moses points the way for us. When God revealed His plan to destroy Israel again after they refused to enter Canaan, Moses prayed that God's *strength* would be displayed.<sup>8</sup> That's an odd word to choose isn't it? When I think of strength, I think in terms of the power to no longer have to put up with unpleasant situations or people. That seems like the ultimate test of strength—irritating people

<sup>8</sup> Num. 14:17-19.

are gone! Moses, however, meant something quite different. He prayed that God would be true to what He said about Himself; that He would be slow to anger, abounding in love, forgiving their sin and pardoning them one more time. In other words, God shows His strength in His mercy. Therefore, Moses prayed that God would be merciful to these people when they again bring themselves to the brink of disaster. Unlike Moses, I pray too much for my own comfort and convenience. In a marvelous (gospel!) irony that shows God's heart, Moses' prayer here, and assuredly Christ's in heaven, is in the best interest of the people who have failed the worst. If Christ prays that way for you, then you now pray that way for others, "Lord, please don't give him what he

than half a day.<sup>9</sup> Those who have lots of negative history and no skills or experience in doing it right might benefit from involving a third party help them mediate their differences.

Finally, let the center of gravity of your conversation be that the biggest issue for someone in danger is between him and God.<sup>10</sup> This is simply the logical extension of believing that people answer to God for much more than they answer to me, even when they sin against me. Therefore, a ministry-motivated conversation keeps that God-ward focus primary. It is striking that Moses rarely talks to the Israelites about how hard they are making his life. He does not discuss how frustrating they are to him personally. Instead, his concern is for their welfare and not his own aggravation. How do you know he really

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deserves. Show her how dangerous this path is that she's set her heart on. Turn him back from his grumbling before he destroys himself."

These five suggestions imply that you have taken a break from the heat of the interaction. You will often need to step back and take time to sort out your priorities and that can hardly be done in the heat of conflict. Suggest to the other person that you both take some time out. Say that you need to think and pray and you hope the other person will do the same. Agree to resume the conversation at a later time. Commit to not simply walking out on each other. For some people with short histories and decent Christian maturity, this can be as short as 5-10 minutes. As much as it surprises me, it is possible to do this in a chaos-filled living room! For relationships with an entrenched pattern of hostility and for people who are not used to ministering to each other in the heat of battle, this period is often much longer. It may take hours, but I don't recommend waiting more

cares for them? The bottom line for him is that God does not destroy them, but continues to go with them. One way to tell whether or not a conversation is truly geared for the sake of the other is to ask, "If she responds the way I hope she does to what I've said, who will benefit most, her or me?" In ministry, our hope is always that the other person connects with God in a way that restores peace between her and God, which then results in peace between her and me.

You need to have ministry in mind when others frustrate you. Anything less denies what Christ has done for you. As unnatural—supernatural!—as it feels, ministry to others should be your goal and practice in frustrating relationships. It is what your Father longs for. It is what Christ still does for us. It is part of the work of the Holy Spirit who lives in you. And it is part of who God desires you to be.

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<sup>9</sup> Here I'm trying to take seriously Paul's admonition in Eph. 4:26 about keeping short accounts with each other to avoid compounding disunity and divisions between people.

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<sup>10</sup> Since my present primary concern is to discuss the importance of a ministry motivation even in conflict, I will not address the actual interaction in anything more than a cursory manner. For those interested in further resources to guide the actual ministry aspect, I recommend Paul Tripp's *War of Words* and *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* along with Ken Sande's *The Peacemaker*.