

JOHN ORTBERG: A lot of you will know Henry from his ministry to us as a church, because he's becoming a good friend to us. He spoke here. He was interviewed by Nancy Beech and Nancy Ortberg last year on Mother's Day. He has spoken for our staff, and here he is.

Just another couple words about him. He is going to be ministering to some of our staff this weekend. A lot of coaches are going to be having a weekend away, and Henry's going to be with them. A lot of you hear him on the radio. He combines a very high devotion to scripture with a deep commitment to scholarship in the social sciences, and he does it in a way that's very winsome and very accessible for a lot of us. So, Henry, we're delighted that you're here tonight. We already clapped, so I think we covered that one.

Let me start with this, Henry. A lot of us have difficulty in relationships of one sort or another, and our first desire reflexively tends to be to just want to walk away. There's a difficult person. I would rather just have all easy people in my life and no difficult people at all. Why is it so important that we stick to it and learn how to deal effectively with people that are difficult for us?

HENRY CLOUD: You tell me you'd save the hard ones for last.

JOHN ORTBERG: Who's the most difficult person here at Willow Creek that you've ever met?

CLOUD: John, in our field, one of the things we do when people kind of don't get it over the years is we do interventions. You thought tonight was a church service?

JOHN ORTBERG: Yeah, let's just see how you do up here all by yourself. Did my wife put you up to this?

CLOUD: Why put up with it? First of all, we've got to remember that all of us, at some point in our lives, were that person. Each of us is where we are today because somebody has helped us to get there, and, hopefully, we're a little less difficult today than we were a year ago, two years ago, ten years ago.

So it's always, always, always a good place to start with remembering what 2 Corinthians 1 says. "We comfort others, we give to others out of the same kind of comfort that God has given to us."

So it's a good place to start, whenever I'm with somebody difficult, to remember who I might be still or, at least, who I was when I was more difficult than I was today.

Secondly, I think that that's what God is about. God is about seeking and saving that which was lost. It's an interesting word in the New Testament that means loss. It's a word that means, basically, damaged.

A lot of times we think of lost people as those out there in the world, the lost people in the world, but the reality of it is that, scripture tells us, we can be in the family and still have at least parts of ourselves that are lost.

Basically, what it means to be lost is out of relationship and damaged. That's sort of redundant because whatever is out of relationship is still damaged.

So, to that degree, it's very important in small groups of friendships, or any kind of relationships, that when someone is difficult, we are actually trying to seek and to help redeem and transform that part of them that still needs to come to grace.

The third thing that I've tried to get to in my life that's getting a little bit easier is that we need to realize that whatever difficult person we have in our lives, we need them.

The reason we need them is because, to the degree that anybody can get me into the darker parts of myself -- you know, the reason why a certain kind of person is difficult for me and not for you is, I've got different areas of craziness than you do, and they tap into it.

I see you in some argument with somebody, and I go, "Why does that bug you?" and vice versa. We all have different issues, and we are going to somehow find ourselves upside down with certain kinds of people.

James says in chapter 1 that that kind of trial, we need to go through it. We need to find out what is it about me that this person is able to kind of change me from light to darkness. What is it about me that they tap into that I need to bring out and get transformed?

So difficult people are difficult, but they always, if we submit to the process, do us some kind of favor.

JOHN ORTBERG: So it's kind of a growth thing that will happen with them that won't happen if they weren't there.

CLOUD: Right.

JOHN ORTBERG: Let me ask kind of a diagnostic question. Let's say that I'm in a small group or in a setting at work, and there's a person present where I think they might create problems for the group. How do I identify that and try to deal with it ahead of time, before that person becomes a distraction or a problem for the group?

CLOUD: First of all, I think you've got to figure out what kind of group it is. Here, generally, your small groups have some kind of structure to them. We meet sort of for this reason, for this amount of time, this is what we're going to do, and I think that, generally, the boundaries and limits around somebody who's destructive tend to help that process the more those limits are known up front.

For example, if you start a group and say, "**We're going to meet and we're going to talk about certain kinds of things in certain kinds of ways in this sharing process, etc.,**" then it's already set up. **So when someone gets difficult, it's a lot easier to intervene and say, "That's not what we're really here to do."**

One of the things that distinguishes a human from a German shepherd is that a human has the ability to not only hear "No" and "Stop," fearing a jerk on the choke chain, but begin to actually think about what

I'm doing. We call it an "observing ego" in psychology. In other words, there is some I that is looking at the rest of me.

The Bible always tells us to be in a process of observing ourselves and looking at ourselves and evaluating ourselves. That's one of the things that any good group has to do, as well, and the leader is responsible for that.

So if you interrupt somebody in the group and say, "You know what, we're really not here to fight," or blame or argue, or "We're not here to go into those topics" or for that long or whatever it is, they begin to get a hint.

After you've done that three or four times, they start to observe, "Why am I the only one getting the choke chain here?" They've grown.

JOHN ORTBERG: You're not talking about a literal choke chain?

CLOUD: You all don't use those here? But if they're not getting a hint, and this is very important, you must realize that if you are a leader, you are there to maintain the boundaries and the structure of the process of the group.

Sometimes if someone doesn't get a hint, you have to begin to provide the function for them that they don't have. It may be, in that case, just to be quiet. So you enter in, in some way, and help them to be quiet. Sometimes it's by saying something soft like, "You know, we've already heard from you. Let's hear from some other people."

If that doesn't work, you begin to, again, sort of elevate it to the group level and say, "How do you all feel about the things that are going on tonight?" Hopefully, the group will begin to help you.

JOHN ORTBERG: So you actually look for help from other people in the group?

CLOUD: Yes, I think the role of a group leader or a group facilitator, and you've got to remember this, because one of the things that happens in crummy groups is that, seriously, it'll happen in every setting -- crummy groups will tend to be one-on-one dialogues with an audience. Think about it. Somebody will begin to share, and everybody looks to the leader like, "What are you going to say?"

JOHN ORTBERG: Kind of like what you're doing right now.

CLOUD: Sort of like that, yes. That was a process statement. Did you see how he sort of elevated it and made us look at that? What the facilitator's role is, is to get the group to do the work of community. See, God has designed this thing called a body, and this body is supposed to be healing itself.

Ephesians 4 tells us that we are healed and changed and grown up, basically, as we're connected together. Each part of this big group or this small group does its work.

The crummy groups, the group is not doing its work. The leader is doing the work of the group, and in every group there should be expression of care, expression of truth, an abiding sense of safety, limits

and boundaries set on some things, modeling and identification with somebody better than you and trying to get like them.

All of those things are present in a group, but if the group isn't doing that, I think it's the role of the leader to begin to do that, to say to the group, "This is not a dialogue. I want you guys to begin to help." Nobody's talking to her. Nobody's talking to him. I would stop at that point and say, "Why? Am I making that difficult? Is it scary to do this?" Then you elevate it to a deeper level of community.

Some people say you can't get that direct, and I say that if you can't do that in the body that God designed to heal us in, if it's not going to happen here, it's not going to happen at a coffee shop or at work or somewhere else.

If we can't begin to get real and say, "What's going on in this group for the last month has not been helpful to me" or "I need something different" or "We've got a problem here," if we can't learn to metabolize our fallenness and our pain within the family, how can we do it out there?

JOHN ORTBERG: What holds a leader back from doing that? Is it a fear thing or just not recognizing it? For people here that are leading groups, what do they need to do to get themselves ready to make those interventions when they need to?

CLOUD: I think it's very difficult for us to do things that we have not seen. I think that, throughout the Bible, God talks about the modeling process. Paul says do it like I've done it. Jesus says follow me and live like I live. God says I gave you these stories and people as examples.

One of the reasons, I think, by very good-hearted people and leaders who want to do it right, is they've never seen it done. So one of the things I think you need is, first of all, your own group experience as a member in a good group that works before you become a leader.

Secondly, the leader either consciously or unconsciously sets the parameters of where we can go in this group. Some of those limits are good. Some of them can be defensive, though.

For example, say I've got a problem with sadness, because I've never faced a lot of the grief in my life, or I've got a lot of hurt, and I'm put in charge of a group. If we're talking about commitment and struggle and we've got to pray harder and we've got to work, as long as it's those sorts of things, I'm leading the group and I'm right in there. I let the group join in, and we become an army.

The moment somebody comes in on a particular night and starts to talk about something unsolvable, like somebody dies or somebody's got cancer or the kid has run away from home or something that I can't do something about, if I can't go into those existential moments of life and be there with the presence of God and help the group to come to that person with God's care, then if I'm afraid of those kinds of feelings and moments in my own life, I'm going to, as a leader, disrupt the process. I'm going to somehow not let that group go where it needs to go, because I'm afraid to go there.

So it's just like Jesus said over and over, we've got to get the log out of our own eye first before we can, in this instance, see the group clearly, because we'll think it needs something else because I haven't faced my own issues.

JOHN ORTBERG: Here's a deal that I think probably every small group leader and every one of us has faced in a group setting or some kind of social setting. Let's say there is a person that is doing something inappropriate. Somebody's dominating a conversation or expressing anger in a destructive way.

How do I decide when should I say something in front of the whole group, or when do I need to be quiet while the group's going on and pull the person aside one-on-one afterwards?

CLOUD: I think that some of that is set up in the ground rules. There are groups, **I think, where processing what is happening in the moment and that kind of deeper source of growth is really not the purpose of the group. That's not why we're there.**

Then on the other end of the continuum, there are groups where everybody decides in the beginning I want to share my life here, I want to share my issues here, I want to share who I am, and I also want feedback. I want to hear from you all how I'm doing and share together like that.

Generally, it's best, I think, to decide beforehand what kind of group this is, because that dictates what kinds of interventions I make. But if somebody is clearly not just on the immature end of things, where they interrupt and you say, "Joe, stop interrupting," but if someone is . . .

JOHN ORTBERG: Because some people interrupt a lot.

CLOUD: Okay, group, help me.

JOHN ORTBERG: That was a rhetorical request for help.

CLOUD: **There are people that do things that tend to disrupt a group process, and there are people who do things that actually are destructive to a group process. I think that with someone who's kind of innocently immature, doesn't know what's going on, you guide them. If they get the hint, you've cured it. If they don't, you talk to them afterwards.**

Unless the group is a group where we've all decided we're going to give feedback to each other, and "What did you all feel when he interrupted?" You ask the group things like that, or "Why do you find yourself doing that?" etc. If we've agreed that that's the kind of group it is, it's a cool thing.

On the other side of the coin, I think that there are people who are not immature and have foolish parts of themselves, but they have actually gone into that category, either knowingly or unknowingly, of what the Bible calls "doing evil."

The Scriptures kind of refer to three groups. There is the wise man, who is somebody that doesn't have it all together, may be very immature, but the wise person is someone who responds to the light when

the light shows up. So you can say, "Joe, stop interrupting." He goes, "Whoops, sorry." He didn't know what he was doing. That's a wise person.

There's a fool or a mocker that if you confront them, you're going to get into some sort of argument, and, generally, you have to have a little better structure around them.

But this other category that I'm referring to is someone who is kind of doing evil. What I mean by that is, what they are doing is not immature and it's not a habit or whatever. They are actually doing something that is destructive to the light, it's destructive to the truth, it's destructive to another person.

Wherever I see the emergence of evil in a group setting, I will set a limit on it right there. I'll say, "You know what, that's not what we do here. We don't name call or we don't attack people. If you're angry about something, I'll be glad to help you share it with the group, but we don't do certain things, and that's not okay."

I think that that is part of the good kind of discipline that the Bible talks about a healthy body does.

JOHN ORTBERG: Is the difference there, the person that would be moving in the direction of doing evil, there would be a level of intentionality about it? In other words, the fool kind of bungles into it.

CLOUD: Yes, I think there is. Now, they will deny it, but you'll know it by its fruit.

JOHN ORTBERG: That's a good word. I think that's such a strong word. We tend to shy away from words like that and want to assume everybody's doing the best they can. We just need to acknowledge and deal strongly with the fact that sometimes they're not.

CLOUD: Right. It's a hard thing for us, but God has talked about some metabolic sorts of processes that his family is supposed to be doing.

One of those is that we come together as a family, and in that family he is pouring good things into us. He is pouring teaching, support, nurturance, the modeling of talents and correction, and he is growing us up, because we all came from this dysfunctional family, the family of Adam. It's the human race. Everybody here is from a dysfunctional family. If you don't think so, then you're in denial.

A lot of people think that they didn't, but God says you did, that you came from this seed of humanity that doesn't have its act together. So what he's done is, he's gone into that sort of cesspool and he's rescued us from that. He's put us into this new family.

He says, "This time I'm going to do it right. In your first family, it didn't all happen. You got abandoned, you didn't get corrected, you got away with things, you got hurt, you got abused, but in this family I am going to be the parent. I am going to pour in all of the resources. I am going to structure it, and we are going to do it right."

The way he does that is, he pours all of those resources into you and into you and into you and into me, and he gets us together. Like 1st Peter 4:10 says, that when I love you, that that is God's manifest grace expressing itself.

When you're in a small group and someone is upset and you comfort them, the Bible says that is God comforting them. That's the way his body works. So one of the things a body does is, it pours in good things.

The other thing that any body does is, it keeps the good stuff in, and it keeps the bad things out. See, I have skin that keeps poison from going into my pores, and I've got metabolic systems that, if I ingest something toxic, I'll throw them up.

See, God's body is designed to keep the bad stuff out of the camp, to take the bad stuff in us and confess it and get it out there, but when the wolves come after the sheep -- Scripture talks about that in the church there's danger.

There are destructive people, and we have to have the process in this family, like any family, of keeping the bad stuff out. That's a hard word, but we need to do it.

JOHN ORTBERG: There's another, it's really a discernment issue, this topic of dealing with difficult folks, which we all can be, raises. Sometimes in a group, somebody is suffering some sort of trauma and loss, and it's real appropriate for the group to say we just need to focus on this person.

On the other hand, I remember being in a small group one time, and one of the women in it had some issues with her parents that were difficult for her growing up. There was a tendency for the whole group to focus on that every time the group met together.

How do you discern when is a group giving appropriate support to somebody who is in a season of need, on the one hand, and when is it appropriately becoming a group therapy session or revolving too much around one person's need?

CLOUD: One of the ways you can tell that something good is happening in life is that it turns into something else. In other words, if someone is growing and they are receiving some sort of help and need is being met, then if that's truly being received, they are going to transform into something different and get to the next level.

For example, in 1 John it says, "Little children, welcome to the family. I've written to you because your sins are forgiven." Then it says, "Young men, I've written to you because you've overcome the evil one." Then it says, "Old guys, I've written to you because you know God. You know the one who's been from the beginning."

Throughout the Bible there are these stages of transformation that we go through and are expected to go through. So one of the ways that a leader can tell if what is going on here is good or not, is there any fruit from it? There are moments in any group, instead of everybody sharing, somebody just died or something just happened, and that night we are here for you.

The difference in those moments where it's real and where something truly good is happening is the ones who are giving don't experience it as one of those "when's this going to be over?" kind of things,

because the presence of their exercising their gifts and their being the presence of God with those people is just as much a transforming and real experience as the one who is receiving.

There's a certain reality to a group that a good leader can feel, that what we're doing tonight is not what we planned, but it's good. If something is real and it's good, you see that person somehow over time being transformed by it.

I think if we had anybody who came into a group and did the same song and different verse for two years, somebody should have said way before then something like, "You know what, we've kind of done this. In fact, we've done this more than once. I'm wondering, Susie, the last time we talked about how bad your mother was, everybody nodded and cared . . ."

JOHN ORTBERG: Are you thinking of anyone in particular?

CLOUD: "That was a year ago, and then the next time we did that. Then we had Easter break, and after that, we did it again. What I'm noticing is that you're doing the same thing, and the rest of you are doing the same thing. One of the things that we want to do here as a group is, we want to grow.

What I'm seeing as the leader is, A, the group is not growing past Mabel's mother and, B, Mabel isn't getting past Mother, and, C, you all are not doing anything different with Mabel than you were doing a year ago. What's wrong? Let's put Mabel and Mabel's mom on the shelf for a minute, and let's talk about what we've been doing here."

My hunch is if you just ask that kind of question, if you said, "Has this been fun? Is this what you all can't wait to come to do week after week? Is this like when you're trying to fill the empty chair at work? You go tell them, come join our group, and for the next year you can hear about Mabel's mom." That's sort of a real thing, but if we can't do it in the family, where can we do it? I would begin to make that culturally okay in that group.

JOHN ORTBERG: And you would raise those issues with Mabel there in the group?

CLOUD: In the kinds of groups that I like to be in and like to do, I would raise those issues with Mabel . . .

JOHN ORTBERG: And her mother.

CLOUD: We can invite Mom if you want. One of the things that a leader does is, a leader models how to go places where people have never been.

When you look at the great spiritual leaders in all the stories of the Old Testament, they grabbed people who are at one level of development and spiritual growth with God and were miserably comfortable there. They grabbed them and said, "Let's go get really, really uncomfortable for something better."

So there's always this pulling, the afraid and the I don't want to go there and the grumblers and all that to the next. I think that's part of any vibrant spiritual growth.

A church has to do that sometimes, face things corporately, a relationship has to do it, a marriage has to do it, sometimes a small group does it. But the other thing a leader does is not just drag people there like the T groups of the sixties, where everybody's confronting each other and beating each other up and all that.

But one of the things the leader does is makes that passage tolerable. If the leader is saying it with grace and if the leader is making sure that everybody else says it with grace, and if the leader is creating an atmosphere where, hopefully, little Mabel could laugh at herself, when we really get into this, and part of that is disclosing some of our own journey, that my preference would be that, at least in the best groups, that's something that absolutely we could talk about.

JOHN ORTBERG: What I like a lot about what you're saying is, when a leader does that through things like asking questions, then it's not just a leader's job to do confrontation, but the leader is opening it up and saying, everybody in this group needs to grow to the level where we can do that together.

CLOUD: Exactly, and what you just described is a great theological truth of a metaphor that the Bible talks about always of how a body works. The entire body of Christ is constructed of all of us, and it says that Jesus is the head, but Jesus is not doing the work. He's organizing the work.

See, the brain sends the signals and oversees in a circuit-board sort of way all the different things the body does. If your head tried to get down on the floor and walk, the body would not get anywhere, but what the head does is tells this foot to move and kind of coordinate it, etc. That's what the leader does, turns to members in the group and says, "How do you feel about what we've been doing with Mabel?"

JOHN ORTBERG: Instead of just flopping around on the ground.

CLOUD: Instead of flopping around on the ground. And let me give you one little tidbit that will transform your group or break it apart. Believe me, there are some groups that need to be canned. Nothing good is happening there.

Whenever you get stuck as a leader, and everybody as a group leader gets stuck, if you want to jump into the deep end, when you feel stuck, instead of trying to fix the stuckness, make it the group's problem. You notice it, you observe it and you pose the problem to the group.

You say, "You know what, I'm feeling like we're stuck. I'm feeling like we keep going over the same thing. We're not getting to another level or we're not moving. Does anybody else feel that way, or am I the only one?"

Sometimes that just opens up all sorts of doors. Everybody goes, "I'm glad you finally brought it up." Then the leader says, "Well, you're a member of this group. Why didn't you bring it up? What I want to talk about right now since you brought that up, Susie, is why aren't we bringing things up in here? Is it something I'm doing? Am I making it difficult? Do you all not know that that's okay to do here?"

So the tidbit is, get out of the problem and get into talking about the process of the group. In other words, get out of whatever you're stuck with and comment to the group about what's happening -- "It

seems like nobody's sharing much tonight," or for the last month, that "It's been kind of weird in here. Has anybody noticed that?"

Or "It seems like we're doing really, really well now and have been for a few months. Can everyone share why is it better here? I know it's better, but what was it we did?"

Then Mary says, "It all started for me the night that I talked about my struggle with drugs, and I found out that you guys didn't judge me. In fact, Tom started talking about his. For me, that night this group got to a different level."

Then the leader says something like, "So for you it was compassion and grace. Did anybody else feel that, or was it something different for anyone else?" etc.

Or if you really want to take it to a different level, say, "Mary, it sounds like you've been touched by grace by some people in this group. Is that right?" She says, "Yes." "I want you to not tell me about what Tom did for you. I want you to tell Tom what Tom did for you, and I want you to tell him what that was like for you and what it was about the way that he loved you that has changed your life."

See, now we're moving out of theory into the body doing the metabolizing of living in this world, the metabolic transformation of disease and sickness and brokenness. The antibodies run in the group and say, "That's a germ. We've got to fix that," or "That's a wound. We've got to heal that."

The body is going to every member and doing its work, instead of reading a book on anatomy. The body is actually working. It's in a process.

JOHN ORTBERG: Does this make you want to be that kind of a body? That's so good. Henry, I hate to stop. We're out of time. Just in a couple of seconds, are there any last words you'd like to leave with us about how can we be most sensitive and effective in dealing with difficult people?

CLOUD: I would say two or three things. One is that the best thing that you can do is you can find the most difficult part of yourself and deal with that first. For some of you it may be that it's difficult for you to confront people and set limits or boundaries.

For others it may be that it's difficult for you to deal with darkness, that if the difficult person in your life is someone that has some really gross things going on, that it's hard for you to face maybe the bad parts of yourself. You don't feel grace for those, and you can't go there with that kind of difficult person.

For others it may be that it's difficult to go to the weaker or softer parts of yourself, and so the difficult ones are the ones that you've labeled as whiners or complainers or weak -- you know, what's wrong with them?

God had called all of us to become like him, where we can do whatever is needed, as the Bible says, what's edifying in that moment, no matter what kind of person we're with. But we can't do that if we haven't dealt with those aspects of us. Get the log out of your eye first is the way the scripture says it.

Secondly, I think that to the degree that we know his grace in our lives -- you get to the point where it's just impossible for someone to do something past what you're able to forgive.

Now, God will always be testing that and bringing you one more nut case that you thought you had it wired until you met him or her. But to the degree that we're receiving his grace and internalizing that and growing in it, it's just a basic fact, the more loving we become the less paranoid and less fearful we become. So if you're afraid of difficult people, grow in his grace and there is very little fear in love.

Then the third one is, become a person who's able to face the truth. Reality is always your friend, no matter how difficult it may be, no matter how hard. Whatever it is you've got to face in a relationship or situation, you will not do yourself a favor by putting it off.

When you get to the point where you see the easy way out as doing the right thing first, which it always is, then, no matter how difficult they are, you're going to be able to go there. By the way, don't do this in a vacuum.

Leaders, do not lead if you're not plugged in somewhere yourself where you are a member and not a leader. I should have said that first. That's the most important.

JOHN ORTBERG: This has been so rich. Thank you, Henry, very much for being with us tonight.