Who do you find tough to love? Is it that person in your church small group who monopolizes every conversation? The boss whose demeaning comments create a toxic workplace? The parishioner who writes Monday-morning emails with a scathing critique of yesterday’s sermon? The passive-aggressive spouse whose distance has driven a wedge in your relationship? The neighbor who blows lawn clippings onto your sidewalk?

I’ve worn several hats over the last 20 years—pastor, professor, therapist. One common denominator is this: no matter where I’ve served or what I’ve done, I’ve pastored, worked with, and cared for difficult people. Truth be told, I’ve been one myself.

If we have any kind of theology of sin, it should come as no great shock that people are difficult. Since Genesis 3, we’ve been hiding. In place of the relational intimacy and deep connection with God and one another for which we were made, we manage and manipulate, we control and coerce, we distance and disconnect. Many of us carry wounds from painful relationships. We’ve experienced trauma from abuse or neglect, from harsh words or clenched fists, from an addicted or absent parent. We’ve hurt others and have been hurt by others.

And let’s be honest—when we put our faith in Christ, our old strategies and deep pains do not magically disappear. It takes a lifetime and a lot of failures along the way to grow into maturity. My belief is that we need a more nuanced understanding of sin and repentance to understand the tough people in our lives and to understand ourselves. We also need to listen to the wisdom of psychologists and sages who teach us about the complexity of human beings. So let’s explore how to love and understand the most difficult people among us.

Sin and Hiding
We often talk about sin as something we do or fail to do. And we describe our sin with behavioral language:

- I drank too much.
- I spent too much.
- I looked at pornography.
- I yelled at my spouse.

With this behavioral model, growth and maturity looks like doing something different: drink less, spend less, don’t look at pornography, don’t yell at your spouse.
But have you ever tried this approach? I have. I’ve tried it with myself and I’ve tried it with difficult people. The stubborn truth is that our hearts don’t change with simple behavior modification. We’re far more complex than this.

We get a hint in Genesis 3 when we stumble upon Adam and Eve hiding in the garden. Hiding? We’re told that they were naked and ashamed, and so they hid. In their hiding, they began to craft elaborate fig-leaved personas to navigate their new reality. What Scripture is really saying is that they put on masks. They covered their shame—not with Jesus but with their self-made strategies. And we’ve followed the pattern ever since.

Hiding is the byproduct of shame. Shame is that insidious sense not merely that we’ve done something wrong, but that we’re ultimately flawed to the core. Shame is disconnection from God and that we’ve something wrong, but then fall back into the same patterns.

Bill is not merely doing hurtful things. No, Bill learned to relate this way long ago. As I probe his story, I find that Bill’s dad was verbally and physically abusive. Bill felt deep shame and sadness, but there was no space to express this in his home. And so, quite unwittingly, he developed a hardened shell and a resilient wit. His charm and humor won over Jennifer*, his wife, who did not see how hardened and defensive Bill was. In time, his emotional distance, his drinking, and his angry outbursts not only hurt her but left her feeling alone and afraid.

Or consider Jenna*. She’s a larger-than-life personality in the church small group. For the first few months, she keeps the group’s momentum going. She organizes the food, takes prayer requests, and brings plenty of ideas for studies and service. But eventually Jenna starts sounding demanding. She knows the right way the group should go and the right answers to all the questions. Her condescending tone and critical jabs lead to private conversations among the other group members about what to do.

My conversations with Jenna alert me to a much larger drama. It turns out that she is an only child of two successful lawyers. Often neglected and told to grow up and act like an adult, she traded a normal childhood for an early adulthood. She learned to be in charge, articulate, and certain. But she’s really a lonely and sad woman who desperately longs for approval.

Into Adam and Eve’s hiddenness, God emerges with the words, Where are you? Maybe that’s a question for each of us amidst our own relational brokenness. The trouble is that when we treat sin as mere one-off behaviors, we miss a larger relational dynamic going on—a dynamic connected to the larger story of our lives and the relationships that formed us. Loving difficult people means loving them in all of their complexity.

**Sin and Folly**

Scripture gives us a category for difficult people: fools. The fool is so hidden in his sinful self-protective strategies that he lives disconnected from intimate and vulnerable relationship with God and others. He may look religious. He may raise his hands in worship. But like the hypocrite, his heart is far from God.

So who of us isn’t a fool? I find myself turning to Romans 7 when I blow it, to remind myself that even Paul said, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (v. 15). I can relate because I have so many blind spots. And when I’m especially hidden and blind to my stuff, my wife and kids can get frustrated. We’re all foolish in ways, but I have found it helpful to distinguish the degree of disconnection from God, from others, and from our own hearts when talking about dealing with difficult people. I like to use three categories: simple fools, self-consumed fools, and sinister fools.

Simple fools are ordinary, broken sinners who continue to “crawl along, making little progress, going as far as our humble ability allows us,” as John

---

**Loving difficult people means loving them in all of their complexity.**
Calvin said. We’re growing—it comes in fits and starts, but growing nonetheless. Part of our growth is seeing our blind spots. We’re learning not just to repent of behavioral sins (I did this bad thing) but owning larger patterns of hurtful relating. Simple fools in a church small group will hurt one another. It’s inevitable. But when honest conversation takes place, they’ll own their stuff. Jenna might learn to say, “You know, I have lived for a long time needing to be right and certain. I’m really wrestling with it because it hurts people. Thank you for being a friend who I can fail with and yet still be loved. I need that.” Simple fools practice what Calvin called “self-knowledge”—getting to know themselves and their stories in such a way as to bring about greater relational health with God and others.

Self-consumed fools are more hidden. They are often unaware of their patterns. When confronted they may be defensive and difficult. Perhaps the pain in their past is so great that real vulnerability is just too scary. Self-consumed fools may try to change. They may attend a conference or read a book and even appear to change for a time. But their ingrained patterns emerge with a vengeance, leaving a debris field in their relationships. I often tell people to tread carefully and wisely with folks like this. If you can muster up compassion for how they must have been hurt, you can see why they are so well-defended and how it may take time for change to occur.

Bill was a self-consumed fool. In our conversation, he chastised me for engaging in “psychobabble” and blamed his wife for not submitting to his authority in their home. I worried for his wife and wife for not submitting to his authority ing in “psychobabble” and blamed his conversation, he chastised me for engaging to occur.

Not very helpful! Perhaps this is because loving a self-consumed fool is tricky. Bill’s wife, guided by a wise consis-tory and a helpful therapist, separated from Bill with the kids for a time, prompting rage and accusations from Bill. But it was also the wake-up call he needed. Good friends showed him how his folly was a replay of his own childhood. He finally wept at the thought of his children having to cringe in fear as he once had. Bill did not change overnight, and Jennifer was rightly skeptical and slow to reconcile. But in time, Bill’s changes went beyond behavior to real and new ways of relating humbly and vulnerably with his family.

Sinister fools are the most hidden of the three. You may experience them as evil. They learned at an early age that the world was dangerous, and they internalized the cruelty shown to them. I recall Ray*, who sexually abused his two daugh-ters and eight other nieces while telling them that “the Lord permits me to.” I recall Samantha*, who locked her children in the basement with a chain when they misbehaved. I recall reading that Hitler himself was brutally abused by his father and projected his pain on an entire race of people rather than dealing with it. We deal with sinister fools with great care and with guarded hearts. Often church leaders need to lean toward protecting the flock, because extending grace only enables the sinister fool’s cruelty.

Taking a Good Look Inside
My wife of 22 years, Sara, has been extraordinarily gracious to me. We brought sinful, self-protective patterns of relating into our marriage. Of course, we didn’t know this. When we went to premarital counseling, the pastor was more concerned about us “saving ourselves until marriage” than investigating the potentially more toxic patterns that could undermine us. These patterns came to a head about five years into our mar-rriage. Thankfully, we were in a commu-nity of loving friends and wise counselors who challenged us to do the hard inner work of looking at our stories, noticing patterns, and moving toward one another with greater honesty and vulnerability.

All relationships are challenging. Perhaps this is why the communion table is so central to our life together. When Jesus hosts us at the table, he invites us to do the hard work of removing the logs from our eyes, forgiving those we’ve hurt, inviting those we’ve neglected, and coming out of hiddenness into his loving pres-en-ce. God says to us, “Where are you?” He knows we’re hiding. But it often takes real intentionality on our part to do the hard work of unearthing our strategies of hiding our shame and crafting our fig-leaved masks.

What if we as a church took this journey together? What could we become? Jesus took the road of humble vulnerability. I invite you to do the same. It’s worth it.

*Names have been changed.

Chuck DeGroat, associate professor of pastoral care and counseling at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Mich., is the author of Leaving Egypt (Faith Alive) and Toughest People to Love (Eerdmans).