

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Jesus the Master Teacher



SESSION 7
Who Do You Teach?
Difficult Adults

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Who Do You Teach? Difficult Adults

SESSION OVERVIEW

**Who are Difficult Students and
How Do You See Them?**

**How Can You See Adults (Even Those Who are
Difficult) As God Sees Them?**

**Who Was Jesus' Most Difficult Student?
An Example**

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- Think about those difficult adults through the lenses of love that only the Holy Spirit can offer.
- Develop a list of strategies that will help you as you teach those difficult adults.
- Select a biblical character that would have been difficult for you to teach. Explain why this character would have been difficult and describe several strategies you could use to help you see that person “through God’s eyes.”

Who Do You Teach? Difficult Adults



INTRODUCTION

JOURNALING

In this lesson, you will be thinking about the adult learners in your group... not the ones who are interesting, nurturing, or exciting to teach. No, these are the ones I am labeling as “difficult.” As you think about this lesson, please know that my examples are MY examples and will not be yours. I do not know the students in your group that could be labeled as “difficult”; however, I do know that you will experience them sometime in your teaching career. In fact, the stories that follow are part of my journals, thoughts, and notes. As my notes detail, the students I describe have changed, or rather, my attitude toward them changed! Use your journal to help you see your most “difficult” student through God’s eyes! Reflect and write . . . It is important!

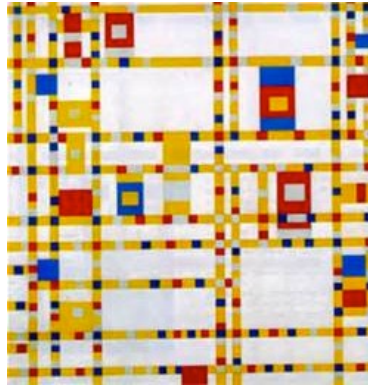
MY WALK THROUGH MUMO IN NEW YORK CITY

Recently, I walked through the beautiful galleries of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. As someone who has been privileged to travel to Europe and Asia, I have seen some amazing art. Although I am certainly not an intelligent connoisseur, I do enjoy a variety of media – paintings, sculptures, and photographs. I try to envision what the different artists meant to say in their creations, and I greatly admire their talent at expression. As is my habit, I purchased cards that showed my favorite art pieces and added them to my collection of souvenirs.

Because I currently write mathematics books for both teachers and students, three of my favorite works contained geometric shapes . . . at least that is what I saw! Piet Mondrian, a Dutch artist (1872-1944) painted two different oil canvases containing squares of different sizes and colors and then displayed them with other shapes to communicate his unique view. One painting was simply entitled, “Composition C,” and the other title “Broadway Boogie Woogie” provided some insight into his meaning. The other artist, Mark Grotjahn, an American born in 1968, employed colored pencil on paper and drew a large number of triangles to create a beautiful design he titled “Untitled” (large colored butterfly white background 9 wings).



Composition C
Piet Mondrian
(Dutch, 1872-1944)



Broadway Boogie Woogie
Piet Mondrian
(Dutch, 1872-1944)



*Untitled (large colored butterfly
white background 9 wings)*
Mark Grotjahn
(American Born, 1968)

I then took the three art works and asked some of my favorite people (my three grandsons, ages 5, 7, and 9) what they saw in the art. Their responses were all different and surprisingly, no one saw what I saw, or what the artist saw in his creation!

Composition C was simply windows and doors to the 9-year-old, a face to the 7-year-old, and a house to the 5-year-old. Broadway Boogie Woogie was a video game to the 9-year-old, a maze to the 7-year-old, and lots of red squares to the 5-year-old. The butterflies were airplane roads, light beaming from the sky, and stairs to the 5, 7, and 9 year olds, respectively. My opinion (and I have no doubts you will be quite impressed with my artistic sophistication) mainly concerned a math objective that required students to count the number of squares or triangles in each composition.

So, what do the opinions of these “art critics” have to do with this topic? The term “difficult” is very subjective. An adult who is in your Bible study may appear difficult to you but not to another adult in the group. Or, you may have a sincere conflict with a student in your group that others don’t recognize at all, making it very difficult to teach impartially. You simply may “see” an adult differently, just as these young art critics each saw the three creations from a different perspective depending on their past experiences. While I did not ask my three grandsons for their subjective judgment of the art, they were still viewing each creation through the lenses of their experiences. Shakespeare in 1588 wrote, “Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye.” Similar in meaning is the common idiom, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” While this familiar statement is one we understand in the positive way, we seldom consider a converse, e.g., the definition of a difficult person is subjective and in the “eye of the beholder.”

WHO ARE DIFFICULT STUDENTS AND HOW DO YOU SEE THEM?



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I wish I could say that you will never have difficulty with any of your adult students. However, I have no doubt that at some time, you will have a teacher/student relationship that could be classified as “difficult.” Interestingly, those students I would classify as difficult to teach would classify ME as a difficult teacher! Imagine that!

Now, let’s talk specifics. Please know that the three adults I will describe are only examples of the students I would classify as difficult. To respect individual identities, actual names are not used. In reality, I consider all of these people to be my friends, and we have reconciled our past difficulties as much as possible. I am only describing them so you can see examples of what I consider to be difficult and how God has helped me see them through His eyes.

The Religious Heretic: Richard was a retired minister in a Wesleyan church. At the age of 85, he had begun to devise his own theology and beliefs, beliefs that he wanted to share almost every Sunday. From what I could understand, he strongly believed that Jesus was God “some of the time” and man “some of the time.” This was especially evident at Christmas time when I would talk about the incarnation and our foundational belief that Jesus was “fully God” and “fully human,” and Richard would say, “Well, Jesus was born as a human and after His baptism, He became God.” Similarly, when we would talk about a time when Jesus wept or when He was angry in the temple, Richard would comment, “See . . . he’s human here!” One of his familiar phrases when I would close the lesson was “What you really should have said is . . .,” and at that time, he would tell how his belief was correct, how he knew because of his history in the church, and by inference (and sometimes directly) how I was wrong. Sometimes, I would react using scripture to support our beliefs, and at other times, I would simply restate what I had taught that week that was in conflict with Richard’s beliefs. As a last resort, I included a series of lessons on the Articles of Faith as recorded in the *Manual* (p. 28, 2013-2017) with a specific emphasis on the one that dealt with Richard’s issue: “We believe in Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Triune Godhead; that He was eternally one with the Father; that He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary, so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say the Godhead and manhood, are thus united in one Person very God and very man, the God-man.” Unfortunately, for a period of more than two years, Richard continued to “help me” (his words) by providing me with many quotes or suggestions from his sources. Indeed, a difficult person for me!

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So, how did I teach Richard? First, I stopped reasoning with him. At the age of 85, he had many wonderful experiences as a minister, but he was no longer able to think before he spoke. When I spent some time with him and his family, I realized that he had a form of dementia and was no longer able to reason as he had before. His sharing with me was only so that I could recognize his worth, and he genuinely wanted to help me. Second, I basically ignored his argumentative statements. Yes, I restated what the scripture said, but it was not necessary for anyone in the class or for me to argue with him. Instead, I focused on the mercy and grace of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Finally, I thought about his wonderful history as a minister of the gospel and his influence in the world where he lived. When I attended his funeral years later, I listened to the many tributes for his service, and with an open heart, I gave a tribute to him as well. Indeed, he was a good man, a man after God's heart!

The Vocal Racist: I met Danny one Sunday when he asked me if I was a good teacher and if he would be welcome in my class. Naturally, I said "Yes, we are a very welcoming group" and then further clarified that he would need to check out my teaching by attending the class at least two times to make his own judgment. Danny was a highly educated, African American who had recently retired from his public position. Our group was very welcoming, and he attended the class frequently. I soon discovered that he made many judgments regarding our mostly Caucasian class members and of course, me. When I referenced a song that I had heard an African American sing and said that I liked it . . . and I had not thought I would, he wondered why I was prejudiced against African Americans. I responded that I normally didn't like that type of music, that it had nothing to do with the fact that the singer was African American. When I asked him to slide down the end seat to make room for another family in the church service, he refused and said he wouldn't go to the "back of the bus" for anyone. When I asked him about his previous job, he informed me that he wasn't treated fairly because his employees were white. One Sunday, he asked me to stop welcoming him when he entered the class because "you make a big deal that I am here because I am the only black person in the class." When I informed him that I welcomed everyone that entered the class and that he wouldn't know that because he was frequently late, he then asked if I thought every black person was late and lazy. Yes, Danny was a difficult person, and I needed help to understand him.

So, how did I teach Danny? I am not sure I did! However, I did learn a great deal from him. I learned to refocus my thoughts concerning Danny, so I considered his many positive qualities more than his rather racist comments. He loved to cook, and we loved to eat his cooking. He loved to decorate for the holidays, and we enjoyed his efforts. He always wanted to help those who were in difficult situations, especially those in other countries, and we made many suggestions of

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how he could do that. I also learned to give him many opportunities to join our group, ride with us to events, and experience the love of God. When he was ill, we visited him in the hospital. When he had a physical issue, someone from the class took him to the doctor. When we had a special Bible study, someone picked him up, so he would remember it. In other words, we did everything we could to show our love and acceptance. I confess that Danny still found situations to express his views of prejudice; however, God helped me refocus on Danny and his need for acceptance and love.

The Conflicted Liar: Sheila was a hurting person who seemed to enjoy sharing her life with everyone. She often had serious prayer requests about her family (three or more ex-husbands, 15 – more or less – children, and a multitude of sisters, aunts, brothers, and uncles). Also, she seemed to be the only person in her branch of the armed services who was a Christian, or the only American in the United States who knew how to vote, or the only person who lived in her apartments who knew how to “act like a Christian.” When she wanted to share the explicit details of a new or past relationship or rant about the current political topic, I would remind her of our class boundaries and stop her sharing. To counter my “lack of caring,” she sent an email to everyone in the church directory detailing my “sins” and also shared that story on Facebook. I still remember the Sunday after the emails and everyone’s hugs and prayers as they supported me. I simply asked them to pray for Sheila and I continued my prayers for her as well . . . but she was still difficult . . . and I must admit, I was happy when she moved away!

So, how did I teach Sheila? First, I didn’t respond to Sheila’s lies. Oh, I wanted to, but God helped me see that my response would not make a difference. I also tried (successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully) to focus on Sheila’s obvious hurts and appropriate ways to counter her lies. Second, I continued to greet Sheila in class, teach as I always had, and remind everyone of the class boundaries. By the time she moved, she expressed thankfulness for the prayers and continued sending prayer requests (in detail) to our class secretary. The “heavily edited” prayer requests were then sent out to the class email list. In addition, the class secretary “hid” the list of emails from all future communication.

So, what are some strategies that you can use as a teacher when you encounter those difficult students? Let me first address this question from an educational viewpoint. Educational psychologists and theorists have many suggestions for teachers. Implementing them often depend on the specific behavior to be checked rather than his or her personality or background. As Christian teachers of some difficult students, I think it is important for us to use some of these practical suggestions; however, asking God to help us see others as He sees them is essential.

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- Ignore the poor behavior: This strategy works sometimes, especially if the student seeks special attention. We know that some students want attention and that if the behavior doesn't get that attention, sometimes the behavior changes. Initially, this strategy worked well for Sheila; however, I needed to use other strategies after a while.
- Present opportunities for good behavior. Identify the student's strengths and seek opportunities that would allow him or her to exhibit good behavior. This strategy worked well with Danny as he was able to offer help to others in other countries who, in his opinion, were not prejudiced.
- Find something to brag on the student. In educational terms, this means that you should not think of students as having deficits; rather, you need to see them for their potential. This is generally a win-win strategy for most people. When I was able to discover Richard's condition and his successful ministry experience, it was easy to brag on him rather than argue about theology.
- Confront the poor behavior. In some cases, this is a strategy to be considered when the behavior must be stopped. While I did not confront Sheila for her lies, one of the assistant pastors did so without my knowledge. She reminded her that we were a family and that "People will know we are Christians by our love for one another."
- Meet with the student in a comfortable setting. Often times, when students are not in front of others, their behaviors that cause difficulty are simply misunderstandings. Meeting with Richard and his family certainly helped me understand his dementia and opened my eyes to his experiences.
- Ask for help from others. Sometimes it helps to get another's perspective. In all three of the cases I described here, I talked confidentially with my assistant teacher and in one case with my pastor. They were able to give me a fresh perspective and helped me open my eyes.
- Remove yourself from the interaction. Amazingly, not everyone likes my teaching. In that case, I think you can recommend that the student find another group or teacher who would be able to meet her needs. I often look myself in the mirror and say, "Your job is NOT to get everyone to like you! Your job is to show Christ to everyone you meet!"

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Again, I must include the most important strategy! Remember that you are privileged to teach God's unique creations. Because of your differences or similarities with some of your adult students, you may be (or will be) irritated or bothered by some of them (just as they may be bothered or irritated with you!) The most important strategy is PRAYER, i.e., specific prayer for each student and for you as you teach and interact with each of the adults in the group. When you sincerely pray for those difficult people, I continue to be amazed how God works out the situation and reminds me that I too need to grow in grace and ministry.

HOW CAN YOU SEE ADULTS (EVEN THOSE WHO ARE DIFFICULT) AS GOD SEES THEM?

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This is an impossible task and one that (despite my frequent attempts) I cannot do without God's help. To see adults as God sees them, I must rely on the Holy Spirit to give me sight AND insight about those students that I have. I love the story of Saul and Ananias found in Acts, chapter 9. When the Lord sent Ananias to meet a blind Saul, Ananias told him, "The Lord, . . . hath sent me so that you may receive sight, see and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again" (Acts 9:17-18).

Oswald Chambers described Paul's sight and insight in this way. "When Paul received his sight, he received spiritually an insight into the Person of Jesus Christ, and the whole of his subsequent life and preaching was nothing but Jesus Christ.

Since mine eyes have looked on Jesus,
I've lost sight of all beside,
So enchained my spirit's vision,
Gazing on the Crucified."

(Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, p. 93. 1935. Discovery House Publishers)

Paul described his new sight by focusing on Jesus Christ, "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:2). When your eyes are focused on Jesus Christ, you will begin to see others as He sees them. Praise God!

In fact, Paul's insight into some of his difficult students is expressed in this way in II Timothy 4:14-22: "Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. ...At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side..." Please note that Paul's focus on Jesus and "Him crucified" made a difference as he dealt with the most difficult students...even when everyone deserted him. He must have seen them with the eyes of Jesus, and that was the only way he could say, "May it not be held against them."

WHO DID JESUS TEACH? AN EXAMPLE



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I admit that I chuckle a bit when I think about Jesus' most difficult student. He had so many! They vied for His attention, they behaved badly, they deserted Him at the moment He needed them the most, they denied they even knew Him, they didn't get his teaching even after He told them over and over again, and one even sold Him for 30 pieces of silver. And then, when I get too self-righteous, I reflect on my learning and the number of times Jesus goes over and over and over again with the lessons I need to learn. Indeed, I could be classified as a difficult student!

If I had to choose, however, I think Thomas could have been one of His most difficult students. Jesus chose him as one of the twelve (Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18), and then designated him as an apostle (Luke 6:15). As an apostle, Thomas lived with Jesus, heard his many sermons about the Kingdom of Heaven, and was taught that Jesus was God's Son with a special purpose on earth. Nevertheless, Thomas expressed his loyalty pessimistically when he volunteered to go with Jesus to Jerusalem. Thomas' words, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" showed that he was thinking that if they went to Judea, Jesus would die and he would die with Him (John 11:16). Thomas just didn't get it! And, when Jesus gave His last words before His arrest, Thomas said to Him, "Lord we don't know where you are going so how can we know the way?" (John 14:5). I imagine that Jesus sighed before He answered forcefully, "I am the way and the truth and the life!" And then He looked into Thomas' eyes as he said, "IF YOU REALLY KNEW ME, you would know my Father as well." (John 14:6). I can't help but think that Jesus was wondering at this point if He had taught Thomas (and the other disciples) anything. Then, in probably the most familiar event, we hear Thomas' declaration after the resurrection "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it" (John 20:25). A week later (A good teacher gives a student some time to reflect), Jesus appears before Thomas with the others, commands him to "put your finger here, see my hands, reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe!" (John 20:27). At this point, Thomas goes from being a difficult student to one who knows His Master's teaching as he *falls to his knees, bows, and says, "My Lord and my God!"* (John 20:28). Thomas continues to learn when Jesus provided him and the other disciples breakfast (John 21:2) and when he follows His commands to wait in the upper room for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:13).

So Jesus, the Master Teacher, persisted over and over again to convince the skeptical Thomas who He was. He answered his questions, allowed him to express his doubts, came to him, and convinced him to doubt no more. Jesus cared for even the most difficult students. What a model for us as teachers!



CLOSING THOUGHT

I hope as you read this session, you thought about the times you have been a difficult student. Perhaps you have needed Christ to teach you the same lesson over and over again, perhaps you have doubted despite all the evidence that God has provided for belief, or perhaps you have just not listened and paid more attention to the words of others. Whatever the case, whenever you encounter a difficult student, think about Jesus and His way of seeing everyone. I pray that you will see your students as God would see them . . . even if they are difficult!

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

Be prepared to share your three application activities with your mentor.

1. Identify one of your current or past adult students who might be described as difficult. (If you currently do not have any students, describe a friend without naming them.) Describe their characteristics. Describe what you could do to see them through God's eyes.
2. Select a biblical character that would have been difficult for you to teach. Explain why this character would have been difficult and describe several strategies you could use to help you see that person "through God's eyes."
3. Think about a time when you could be called a difficult student in God's Word. What lessons has God been trying to teach you?

JOURNALING

Consider some of the following when journaling:

- One idea, Bible verse, or story that made an impression on me today was . . .
- A new idea I encountered today is . . .
- One thing that made me uncomfortable today was . . .
- The prayer I most want to pray right now is . . .

EXAM



NOTES

1. What principle(s) do we learn in the story of Richard, the 85-year old retired minister, who had dementia.
 - A. Get to know the story behind the behavior of the person.
 - B. While we always want to affirm the person's worth, we do not always need to respond to a person's arguments.
 - C. Focus on the mercy and grace of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
 - D. b and c
 - E. all of the above
2. When teaching difficult people, it is possible, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to focus on the positive qualities they possess.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. It is never useful to ignore poor behavior, while sometimes it is useful to present opportunities for good behavior, and sometimes it is necessary to confront poor behavior.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. Not everyone will like your teaching, and the best thing for them is to always stay in the group to show their commitment.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. As the teacher, you will not be liked by everyone, so you may not be able to show Christ to everyone you meet.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



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Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. Give a copy of your responses to the second and third application activities to your mentor before you meet.
2. Share your ideas for the first application activity with your mentor and discuss your answer.
3. Plan to ask your mentor for some of his/her experiences dealing with difficult students.