

NEVER TRY TO CHANGE ANOTHER PERSON

As a psychologist, Dr. Henry Cloud has seen it over and over again. A person frustrated because his or her partner isn't as invested in their relationship. A parent desperate for their child to grow up. Someone who loves an addicted person who refuses to get sober.

One of his clients was a father whose son had spent two years in Europe after graduating from college. He had returned home and was trying to figure out what he wanted to do with his life.

The father wanted to see his son take over the business he had started, and so, at the father's invitation, the son began working with his Dad. He began in something of a "floating" capacity, going from department to department to learn what each one entailed. Over the weeks, his father began to notice his son coming in a little late, missing staff meetings, not as fully engaged as other employees. The father wrote it off thinking the son would become more invested in the work once he had direct responsibilities.

Eventually, the son chose marketing as his focus. He was a creative person with a good head for strategy, so it seemed a good fit. But it did not take long before the son's direct supervisor was completely frustrated. The son was missing deadlines and just lacked passion. When he was called on the carpet by his father, the son would pick up the pace for a short time, but would soon go back into his carefree ways.

Finally, Dr. Cloud suggested some options for the father to take. One was to continue doing what he was doing. The other option was that the father give the son very specific guidelines with specific consequences. If the son lived up to those standards, the business was

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his. But if he did not, then it was over. It was time for the son to self-select what he wanted. And his decision might not be what his father wanted.

The father was at least honest with Dr. Cloud: he was not willing to give his son this option. He was going to keep doing what he had been doing because he knew this was good for the son. He was sure if his son would just “get it,” he would do what the father wanted. No matter how many times he consulted with Dr. Cloud, it was clear the father had not awakened to the fact that he couldn’t change his son.

As Dr. Cloud writes, “We can never take over another person’s freedom to choose. Once we understand this, we never go back to thinking we can. We get in touch with the way God has designed the universe. People are not robots; they are free to choose what they want and what they will do and what they won’t do.”¹

During this season of Lent, our sermons are based on Dr. Cloud’s book, *Never Go Back*. As I have noted on Ash Wednesday and last Sunday, “never go back” means the same thing as repent. When we learn a lesson, we don’t repeat it.

When it comes to trying to change another person, it is a hard lesson to accept. And yet, a person’s free will to accept or reject our desires for them is exactly what God has given each one of us: a free will to choose right from wrong. Every time we get frustrated by someone’s refusal to accept what we know is best for them – welcome to God’s world.

Every day, God lives with God’s people freely choosing good or bad. After all, it wouldn’t be a free choice if every time we chose the wrong course, God would correct it. Obviously we

¹ Dr. Henry Cloud, *Never Go Back: 10 Things You’ll Never Do Again* (Howard Books, New York, NY, 2014), pp. 43-48, 51.

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would be a much happier place if God would undo the decisions of people to drive drunk, to reject golden employment opportunities; to make others love us the way we want to be loved.

But when they don't, God accepts that is their choice – and so must we. We too must respect the freedom of others to make their own choices. If we do not respect that freedom, we will nag or otherwise control them, and they will resent it. And we will continue to be frustrated, angry and resentful as we demand someone do things our way.

This is NOT to say, however, that we cannot attempt to influence someone to change. Especially when someone has chosen a hurtful or destructive behavior, we're not supposed to be passive. We should and can try to help.

The Apostle Paul wrote something to the same effect almost 2,000 years ago. His letter to the church in Philippi is one of the most loving and joyful letters he penned. And yet, in Chapter 3, he steps into the role of counseling the Philippians in regards to the people they can't change.

We're not sure exactly what Paul was speaking about in verse 19 when he says "their god is their stomach." If he was referring to the Greeks, the implication is they ate whatever they wanted without thought to health or need – fulfilling their own pleasure was their god.

However, it is more likely Paul had the Jews in mind, in which case he is referring to the kosher laws. The laws of what they could and could not eat were very specific, and very different from their surrounding culture. God gave the laws to the Jews so they would be able to live apart from their neighbors, and perhaps by their example persuade others to follow God. But over time, the Jews became so focused on getting the laws right that they were making the Law itself their God.

Paul doesn't suggest the church make others change. Instead, he invited them to follow his example: be an imitator and model for the people. Paul isn't suggesting he has somehow obtained perfection. But he has learned a key fundamental to God's kingdom: God doesn't change anyone. The Holy Spirit tries to guide us, to inform us of right from wrong, and God gives us all kinds of mentors and teachers who demonstrate and model Christian living. But ultimately, in spite of our best efforts, others may cling to wrong behavior and ideas.

In the case of the father trying to get his son to take over his business, the father needed to set consequences for the son – consequences that gave the son the freedom to choose what he wanted. Once the son chose his course, the father needed to accept that choice and then make his own choices in light of his son's response.

As Dr. Cloud notes, when we realize we cannot force someone into doing something, we give him or her freedom; and in doing so, we find our own freedom as well.² It relieves us from a burden because, right or wrong, we know where the other person stands, and we can choose to live with that or we can choose to move on.

There's the old saying, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. When we commit to never trying to change another person, we finally admit that the horse isn't thirsty or it doesn't like our water.

That doesn't mean we can't be imitators and models. We can show water to the people. We can show them how cool and refreshing it is. For those who are dehydrated, we can explain how the water will end their physical problems. Most of all, we can let people see us drink of

² Ibid., p. 57.

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the water, and see the good effects it can have on our lives. We can even tell them how much we would enjoy having a drink of water together.

But we cannot make them drink – not of physical water and not of Jesus who is known as Living Water.

This week, may we never go back to thinking we can force someone into something they won't choose. May we repent from trying to control others, and freely choose to accept God as our own Lord and Savior.