



What Is It Like to Live With You?

(Philippians 2:3–5)

People do not experience our intentions; they experience our words, attitudes, habits and reactions.

INTRODUCTION — THERE IS A VERSION OF YOU THAT YOU NEVER SEE

Brethren, there is a version of every one of us here this morning that we have never personally met.

Your husband knows that version. Your wife knows it. Your children know it. Your parents know it. Your colleagues know it. The people who work under you know it. Your neighbours know it. And brethren who work closely with you in this congregation know it.

It is not the version you see in the mirror. It is the experience of being around you.

We know our intentions. Other people experience our actions. We know what we meant. They know what we said. We know the pressure we were under. They know how we treated them while we were under pressure.

“So this morning, I am asking: What is it like to live with you?”

Philippians 2:3-5 asks us *not to look only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others*, and then says: *“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”*

So Christianity must eventually affect not only what I believe, but what another human being experiences when dealing with me.

DO PEOPLE HAVE TO MANAGE YOU?

In some homes, before anybody raises an issue, the first question is not, *“Is this important?”*

The first question is, *“What mood is Daddy in today?”* Or, *“Is Mummy in a good mood?”*

At work: *“Please, not now. Oga is not in the mood.”* In church: *“You know how Brother so-and-so is; just leave him.”*

If everybody around me has become an expert in managing my temperament, perhaps I should not only ask what is wrong with everybody. Perhaps I should ask what they are experiencing from me.

Some of us cannot be corrected without turning correction into conflict. Some must always have the final word. Some interpret disagreement as disrespect. One person offends us in the morning, and by afternoon innocent people are paying the bill.

“Why should everybody around me pay for a battle they did not create?”

Pressure may explain why I am struggling. It does not automatically excuse how I treat people.

IS IT ALWAYS SOMEBODY ELSE?

There is a difficult question for all of us: *How often am I the problem in the story I am telling?*



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Listen to the way we naturally tell our stories: *"My husband did this."* *"My wife said that."* *"My children do not listen."* *"My parents do not understand."* *"My boss is difficult."* *"My workers are impossible."* *"That brother... that sister... my neighbour..."*

Have you noticed that when we tell the story, we are very often the reasonable person in it?

Sometimes the question is not only, *"What did they do to me?"* I must also ask, *"What did I contribute to what happened?"*

Maybe my point was correct, but my manner was wrong. Maybe the other person failed, but I refused to listen. Maybe I am waiting for an apology while forgetting the apology I owe.

"Maturity begins when I become capable of finding myself inside the problem."

THE PEOPLE CLOSEST TO US SHOULD NOT GET THE WORST OF US

Let me bring this even closer to us.

Suppose here in the church, Sis. Nuyana says to Sis. Gidilo, *"Sis. Gidilo, you talk too much!"* Now, I am not saying that Sis. Nuyana's choice of words is right, or that her tone is justified. That would depend on the context of the conversation, their relationship, and how it was said.

But just that statement—*"You talk too much"*—could make Sis. Gidilo very angry. She may respond immediately and *give it back hot!*

Or she may not say anything at all. She becomes cold. She quietly distances herself

from Sis. Nuyana. From that day, greetings change. Conversations become shorter. Something begins to grow inside.

But here is where I want us to think.

That same Sis. Gidilo may go to work the following day. A colleague who has known her for years says, with exactly the same kind of tone: *"Gidilo, you sef, you too dey talk!"*

And what does she do? She laughs! She may even add: *"Before nko! You no know say I no fit close my mouth? I must talk! I no want make my mouth smell!"* And everybody laughs.

Same words. Perhaps even the same tone. Completely different reaction.

Nobody goes home angry. Nobody keeps malice. Nobody says, *"After everything I have done for her..."* Nobody blocks anybody. In fact, the laughter may even strengthen the friendship. So what changed?

Was it only what was said—or did who said it affect how I chose to hear it?

Sometimes we give strangers, colleagues and old friends an allowance that we refuse to give our own brethren. We interpret one person's words generously: *"Ah, she is only joking."*

But when a particular brother or sister says almost the same thing: *"I know exactly what she meant!"*

And sometimes, brethren, **we may actually be correct about the other person's poor**



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wording—but still wrong about what we allow that wording to produce inside us.

That brings us back to our question:

Is it always somebody else?

Before I conclude that *“Sis. Nuyana has a problem,”* perhaps I should also ask:

“Why did those same words make me laugh yesterday but make me bitter today?”

“Could my history with this person be affecting how I hear everything she says?”

“Am I reacting only to today’s statement—or am I carrying yesterday’s offences into today’s conversation?”

“Have I already decided what this person means before she finishes speaking?”

Brethren, maturity is not pretending that people never speak wrongly. They do.

Maturity is becoming honest enough to examine not only what somebody said to me, but also what is happening inside me because they said it.

Because sometimes the other person needs to change the way they speak—and **sometimes I need to change the way I receive.**

Sometimes strangers receive our best behaviour while the people who love us receive whatever is left.

Outside the house: *“Good afternoon, sir.” “Please.” “Thank you very much.” “I am so sorry.”*

Then we get home: *“Bring that thing!” “Didn’t you hear me?” “Leave me alone!”*

Isn’t it interesting that we can exercise patience with somebody we may never see again, yet struggle to exercise patience with somebody we promised to spend our life with?

A parent can listen carefully to a client for thirty minutes, then a child says, *“Daddy, I want to tell you something,”* and the answer is, *“Not now.”*

A young person can spend an hour happily chatting with friends, then become irritated because a parent asked one simple question.

A spouse can work tirelessly until what he or she does becomes invisible because everybody assumes, *“That is what you are supposed to do.”*

“Familiarity must never become permission to stop being kind.”

The people who love us most should not continually receive the version of us that requires the most endurance.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU ARE UNDER PRESSURE?

Anybody can appear patient when nothing is irritating them. Anybody can sound humble when nobody disagrees. Anybody can be pleasant when everything is going our way.

But ordinary pressure reveals things: traffic; a delayed meal; a child spilling something; a worker making a mistake; a spouse forgetting something; a church programme not going



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according to plan; a phone call arriving at the wrong time.

Suppose your child accidentally breaks something expensive. Five years later, what will that child remember more: the broken object, or what happened to him because an object was broken?

Suppose an employee comes to you and admits a mistake before you discover it. Does your response make that person more willing to be honest next time—or teach the person to hide the next mistake better?

“Our character is often clearest when life refuses to cooperate with us.”

WOULD I WANT TO DEAL WITH ME?

If I were my spouse, would I enjoy being married to me? If I were my child, would I find myself approachable? If I were my parent, would I feel respected by me? If I worked under me, would I consider myself fair? If I were my employer, would I consider myself dependable? If I were my neighbour, would I be happy that I lived next door?

If everybody in this congregation behaved exactly as I behave—served as I serve, responded as I respond, kept commitments as I keep mine—what kind of congregation would we have?

“The issue is not, “Do people like me?” The deeper question is: “What do people consistently experience because of me?””

CONCLUSION — ONE COURAGEOUS QUESTION

I want to leave us with one assignment—not ten. This week, ask one person who knows you well and whom you trust: *“What is one thing about the way I relate with people that you honestly think I need to work on?”*

And when the person answers, do something difficult: do not defend yourself. Do not explain immediately. Do not say, *“But you too...”* Do not turn the conversation into a court case. Listen.

Maybe your spouse has been trying to tell you something for years. Maybe your child sees something you do not see. Maybe a friend knows something that people around you have learned to endure. Maybe somebody who works closely with you can help you see a blind spot. At the end of our lives, people will remember more than our positions, projects, achievements or public appearances. They will remember what it was like to be around us: *“He listened.” “She noticed.” “He could admit when he was wrong.” “She treated people with dignity.” “His word meant something.” “She was firm, but she was kind.”*

As we begin this quarter of teaching, may the Word of God not merely give us more things to know. May it give the people who live with us, work with us, worship with us and interact with us something better to experience. *“Where the experience of living with me does not reflect the mind of Christ, may God give me the humility—and the courage—to change it.”*
AMEN.