


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BATTLEFIELD OF THE MIND*

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Loving
People
Who Are
Hard
to Love

Transforming Your World by
Learning to Love Unconditionally

Loving People Who Are Hard to Love

INTRODUCTION

I don't think it is a secret that our world today is facing huge problems. There is more anger, hatred, violence, lack of peace, lack of real love, and turmoil than I have ever seen. I am not ancient, but I am seventy-eight years old, as of the writing of this book, so I've lived through a few decades. Of course, in every decade there are problems, but not as many or perhaps even as serious as the ones we face today.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools." I believe this observation applies today perhaps even more than when he said it in 1964. When he made this statement, he was speaking about racial issues, but I believe it is perfect for the challenges we face today, which include not only racial issues but also mass shootings, random acts of violence, hate crimes, abortion, gender confusion, and a shocking increase in reports of mental illness and suicide, especially among young people.

What is the answer to the challenges we deal with in the world right now? It's certainly not that someone else needs to do something to change the situations we face. Each of us must do what needs to be done to change what we can change. We must learn to live in peace and walk in love. And we absolutely must learn to love people who are hard to love, which includes most of us, because we can all be difficult for others to love, at least at times. Love is much more than a feeling; it is how we treat people.

When I began to think about writing this book on loving people who are hard to love, I also thought about people who are easy to love. I concluded that I may know two people who are so easy to love that I do not have to make any effort to love them. But if I knew these people better, I might have to exclude them too.

Unless we become really good at not being easily offended and extending forgiveness to those who hurt us, I don't think there is any hope for peace and unity in the world. If you'd like to know what God's Word says about this, I have included in the appendix to this book a list of Scripture references that will help you forgive and find freedom from offense.

Satan has a plan for humanity, and sadly, at this point in history, many people seem to be playing along with it. His plan is to divide and conquer, because he knows that if people don't unite, he can defeat us. According to Ephesians 6:12, we are in a spiritual war, not a natural one. The only way we can win this battle is to truly love one another, because I believe the Bible teaches that love is a form of spiritual warfare.

Romans 12:21 says that we overcome evil with good. Romans 13:12 teaches us to put on the armor of light, and only light can dispel the darkness that prevails today. To live in the light is to live as Jesus lived, and He is love (1 John 4:8). He loves everyone with no exceptions—even those who are hard to love.

In Colossians 3:14–15, Paul urges us, “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful” (ESV).

What does it mean to “put on” love? It means to love *on purpose*. This sounds so simple if we would just do it—love people, live in peace, and be thankful. But we run into the problem that some people are hard to love, and too often we don't want to do

what is hard, so we follow our emotions (feelings) and let the devil have his way. Then we complain about the conditions in the world and think someone should do something. But we rarely think we should be that someone.

If you are looking for an easy way to love people who are hard to love, I must tell you from the beginning that I don't know of one. But I can tell you that when we do something difficult because we love Jesus and want to obey Him, we not only please God but we grow spiritually, becoming more and more like Jesus.

I do believe the world's problems can be solved, but it will require each of us doing our part. It will necessitate our becoming peacemakers and being willing to make loving others a priority in our lives. This begins at home and spreads from there. I ask you here, in the introduction to this book, to apply its message to yourself, not merely to others. Be willing to see your own faults, not simply those of other people.

In this book, I hope to address from all sides the challenges of loving those who are difficult to love and to leave you with an intense desire to be a peacemaker and a lover of people. I want this to become your main goal in life. Being at peace with people is a part of loving them, so we could simply say that our goal should be to walk in love at all times.

Before we go further, let me close the introduction with these words from Jesus:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:34–35

PART 1

Love Changes Everything

CHAPTER 1

The Greatest Thing in All the World

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

Before we can attempt to love people who are hard to love, we need to understand the importance of love and to know what love is and is not. Loving and being loved make life worth living. Love is the energy of life, and it is what motivates people to get up each day and keep going. Some people are motivated by making money, so they get up each day to climb the ladder of worldly success. Even though they may think they love what they do, they are loving something that can never fulfill or satisfy them. Anything apart from God has no ability to make and keep us happy.

Love is the energy of life.

Everything you take into your home is in the process of decay and will one day land on a junk pile somewhere, so don't place too much value on material goods. The apostle Paul writes: "We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it" (1 Timothy 6:7). If you are spending your time trying to get

more and more material possessions, I encourage you to think seriously about this verse.

Love gives life purpose and meaning. People in the world are looking for love, but they are really looking for God, because He is love (1 John 4:16). Love isn't something God does. It isn't something God gives to good people and withholds from evil people because He is love. He cannot do anything but love because love is *what* He is and *who* He is. While we were still sinners, He loved us and gave His Son to die for us (Romans 5:8).

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) wrote a story commonly called in English “Where Love Is, There God Is Also.” It's the story of a shoemaker named Martuin Avdyéitch, a good man who suffered many difficulties, including the deaths of his wife and of all their children, except his beloved three-year-old son. One day, the son developed an illness, and after being sick for a week, he died. Overwhelmed with grief, Martuin stopped going to church.

One day an elderly neighbor man went to visit Martuin, and Martuin started complaining about all the bad things that had happened to him and saying that he wanted to die because he had nothing to live for.

The old man told Martuin that his problem was that he wanted to live for his own happiness. Martuin asked, “But what shall one live for?” The old man replied that we must live for God. He then told Martuin to buy a New Testament and read it because it would explain everything he needed to know about living for God.

Martin started reading the Bible only on holidays, but eventually read it every night. One night, he read in Luke 7:44–46 the story of Jesus' visit to the house of Simon the Pharisee. As he slept that night, Martuin had a dream that caused him to believe Jesus would visit his house, as He had visited Simon, the following day.

The next day, Martuin looked for Jesus, but when he looked out the window, he encountered only a weary neighbor shoveling snow. He invited the man into his warm house, gave him some tea, and enjoyed a conversation with him.

A bit later that day, Martuin looked out the window again and saw a woman and a crying child, poorly clothed and unable to stay warm in the winter weather. Martuin invited them into his home, led them to warm themselves by his fire, fed them, and gave the woman a coat and some money.

Next, Martuin looked out his window and saw an old woman struggling as she tried to sell apples. A little boy stole one from her, and Martuin convinced the boy to apologize and the woman to forgive him. Martuin then bought the boy an apple and sent him on his way.

When evening came, Martuin prepared to read his Bible and remembered his dream from the previous night. He heard footsteps behind him and a voice whisper to him: “Martuin—ah, Martuin! Did you not recognize me?”

“Who?” Martuin asked.

“Me,” he heard a voice say.

The old man shoveling snow stepped up to Martuin, and the voice said, “It’s I,” then disappeared.

Then the woman and her child who were cold and hungry stood before him, and Martuin heard, “And this is I.” Then they vanished.

Next, the old woman selling apples and the boy who stole from her appeared before Martuin, and a voice said, “And this is I.”

Martuin looked at his Bible. He had opened it to Matthew 25:40: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

The story concludes with this: “And Avdyéitch understood that

his dream had not deceived him; that the Savior really called on him that day, and that he really received him.”

Tolstoy’s story makes my point well. We often want God to visit us or to do some miraculous work to prove that He cares for us, but we can see from God’s Word and this story that anytime we show love to another person, God is there.

Consider these scriptures:

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

1 John 4:12

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

1 John 4:16

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 4:8

True Love in Action

Matthew 25:31–46 tells us what will happen when Christ returns and separates the sheep (righteous people) from the goats (unrighteous people):

He will put the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to

eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

Matthew 25:33–36

Then those on His right will ask when they did these things, and He will answer, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (v. 40).

Next Christ will turn to those on His left and say that when He was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, in need of clothes, sick, or in prison, they did not look after Him (vv. 42–43). Jesus will say to them, “Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (v. 45).

This story is impactful because it teaches us that Jesus considers the way we treat others to be the way we treat Him. Since this is the case, where does that leave all the people who are angry, filled with hatred, and selfish and who do nothing for those in need? We should remember that eternity is a very long time, and the way we live now determines where we will spend it. Will we spend eternity in heaven with God, or will we spend it in utter darkness and misery with the devil?

God gives us all free choice, and we should choose to serve Him no matter what anyone else does. The choices we make now determine what our future will be.

Jesus considers the way we treat others to be the way we treat Him.

Where does loving people fit into your list of priorities? Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (John 13:34 NKJV). If we keep this one command, we will not sin,

because love always puts God first and never does anything that will harm another person.

What Love Is Not

Knowing what love is certainly helps us learn to walk in love, but we are also wise to understand what love is not. Many people become confused about love because people tell them they love them and then act in ways totally inconsistent with real love. Love is not talk or theory, and it is not merely a sermon. It may produce feelings, but it is much more than a feeling, because we can love by choice even when the feeling of love is absent.

My father abused me and my mother abandoned me to the sexual abuse my father perpetrated on me, yet God asked me to take care of them as they got older. I will confess that I was never once excited to go to their assisted living apartment and eventually to the nursing home to visit them. I went because I knew it was the loving thing to do and that doing the loving thing, even to people who had abused and abandoned me, was something that God expected of me. I didn't feel like spending my hard-earned money on them, but I knew that love would have me take good care of my parents. Dave and I paid for them to live in a nice place rather than putting them in a cheap place where we knew they would not be well cared for. We bought their clothing, made sure they had groceries, took them to medical and dental appointments, and helped them in other ways.

We don't have to feel like doing the right thing in order to do it. This is what it means to love people who are hard to love. It means to treat them as Jesus would treat them, no matter how they have treated us.

When we decide to love people who are hard to love, feelings

of love may rarely be present. As I mentioned in the introduction to this book, I think love can be described as how we treat people. It is important to remember that we can love someone and not like everything they do.

When we decide to love people who are hard to love, feelings of love may rarely be present.

The Bible says that God does not show favoritism (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). He gives everyone equal opportunity and loves everyone the same, but each individual must choose how to respond to Him. All prejudice and racial divides would disappear if we all simply loved as God loves. Love sees the best in people, and it is willing to pray about and be patient with the aspects of people that aren't so good. Love always believes the best about others.

Love is not selfish or self-centered, and it doesn't have to be right. As a matter of fact, love sacrifices its right to be right. It is not impatient or harsh. It does not gossip, criticize, or spread rumors about the faults and sins of others, but it covers them and prays for their forgiveness and change of heart.

The Bible says that love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). The story in Genesis 9:18–27, about Noah and his three sons, teaches us this lesson. The ark had finally landed on dry ground, and Noah planted a vineyard. In due time, he made wine, drank until he became drunk, and ended up lying naked in his tent. His youngest son, Ham, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers who were outside the tent (Shem and Japheth). They placed a garment across their shoulders, walked into Noah's tent backward so they wouldn't see their father's nakedness, and covered him.

When Noah awoke and learned what Ham had done, he pronounced a curse upon him. But Noah praised Shem and Japheth

and declared that Ham would be a slave to them (Genesis 9:24–27).

Ham was Noah's youngest son. Often, young Christians who have no experience or spiritual growth make unwise decisions and act in foolish ways. Ham's behavior in this story was unwise, and it shows a lack of spiritual maturity. In 1 Corinthians 3:1, the apostle Paul refers to people who act unwisely as babies in Christ. He even mentions that they are babies because they are worldly, jealous, and quarrelsome (1 Corinthians 3:3). We can assess the maturity level of believers in Christ by watching their behavior. Ham showed spiritual immaturity, but Shem and Japheth showed spiritual maturity. When I was a young Christian, I was quick to gossip and spread rumors, but as I grew in God, I learned that this type of behavior displeases God.

God wants us to cover one another, rather than exposing people and spreading bad reports about them. Not gossiping is part of Christianity 101. Love does not gossip, because love treats others the way it wants to be treated.

Practice Loving Others

As we practice loving people on purpose, we develop the habit of loving others. Those who have practiced love and developed the habit of loving even when it is hard will automatically fall back on love in the situations and challenges they face. However, people who don't make a priority of loving will find that love is not their default behavior.

Years ago, when God showed me how selfish I was and I started trying to learn how to love people, I had to deliberately try to think about it all the time. Now that I have practiced love for years, I think about it without having to make much of an effort

to do so. The same will happen to you. Anytime we form a habit, it is difficult at first. We do it and then we forget to do it, and after a while something happens and we remember again and do it for a while and then forget again. But if we don't give up and we continue praying and asking God for help, we will become more loving people.

Of course, we will always be growing in this fruit of the Spirit called love (Galatians 5:22–23). Paul's prayer for the Philippians was that their love would "abound more and more" (Philippians 1:9), and he encourages the Thessalonian Christians: "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else" (1 Thessalonians 3:12). In other words, we cannot love too much and should always continue to find new ways to show love to other people.

If you want to love people, you will need to take time to listen to them and find out what they want and need. Do they need encouragement? Do they need financial help? Do they need to be included in family activities because they are single, widowed, or lonely? We usually assume that people need and like what we do, but we are all different and everyone feels loved in different ways.

We cannot love too much and should find new ways to show love to others.

In his book, *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman writes about five ways people give and receive love:

1. quality time
2. acts of service
3. words of affirmation
4. gifts
5. physical touch

I like gifts and acts of service. My husband likes quality time. One of my daughters likes encouragement, and one likes gifts and acts of service, as I do. One son likes gifts and one likes gifts and encouragement. Some people have more than one love language, as I do, but most people usually have a dominant one.

If you really listen to people, they will tell you what they want and need.

If you really listen to people, they will tell you what they want and need. They do this without realizing they are doing it. They are not hinting, but as you get to know them you will notice what they like, and you should be ready to love them in ways that they need to be loved.

My husband loves sports, and I don't know or care much about them. In fact, sports would be the last topic I would love to have a long conversation about, but recently Dave and I went to lunch and I spent our time together asking him sports questions and letting him go on and on about the various qualities of different players and their records.

Loving people means doing what is for their good, not necessarily yours. Love is the greatest thing in the world. It has the power to change lives, and it defeats the devil in his works on the earth. Nothing gives people more joy than feeling loved. We can tell someone we love them, and it is meaningful, but when they *feel* loved, it is much, much better. People will always remember how you made them feel when they were with you, even if they forget what you said or did. Make people feel good about themselves and you will have many friends.

CHAPTER 2

Loving People Who Are Hard to Love

*We Must Love People the Way They Are, Not the Way We
Want Them to Be*

Author Unknown

God takes us the way we are and helps us become everything we should be. The question is, are we willing to do this for other people? Dave did it for me, and had he not loved me unconditionally, I probably wouldn't be in ministry today. God wants to use people to help other people, and in order for Him to do so, we must be willing to love people who are hard to love. When Dave prayed for a wife, he asked God to give him someone who needed help, and God certainly answered his prayer, because I needed *a lot* of help.

Many years ago, I shopped at a grocery store that featured a cart containing cans of food that were dented or missing their labels. Everything in the basket cost ten cents, but if you bought a can without its label, you had no idea what you would get.

At that time, we were always short on money, so I would buy several cans hoping for peaches, applesauce, canned vegetables, or something else our family would enjoy. Occasionally I got something good, but sometimes I got dog food, cat food, or

something we would never eat. Dog food may have been a blessing to some people, but we didn't have a dog, so it wasn't good for us.

When I chose dented cans, of course, I got the ones with the smallest dents. I believe we often take the same approach with people, because in certain ways they are much like those dented and unlabeled cans. Everyone comes with some dents in their personality, some characteristics we may not view as positive. In addition, people are not always labeled, so to speak, which means

People are not always labeled.

we may think we are getting one thing and end up with something entirely different. I can hear many people saying, "Amen to that."

My grandson recently looked at a house he considered buying because he could afford it. The house wasn't expensive, but it came as is, meaning that if he bought it, he didn't know how many problems he was also buying. Of course, he and his dad looked the house over carefully to find its faults, and they found one with the foundation—a large crack that had been repaired but looked as though it might still leak during rainy weather. They decided against buying the house, which was probably a wise decision.

The story about dented and unlabeled cans of food and the house my grandson considered buying illustrate the way I was when Dave married me. I had lots of dents and faults, but I had covered them up well. I also came with no label, and although Dave fell in love with me quickly, he had no idea what he was getting. I had a crack in my foundation, because during the formative years of my life, I endured sexual and mental abuse from my father and had a mother who didn't know how to deal with it, so she simply ignored it.

The situation with my parents was probably the most difficult life experience I have faced when it comes to forgiving people who have hurt me. My father did not apologize to me until he was eighty years old. Thankfully, he also accepted the Lord at that point in his life. My mother apologized to me thirty years after I left home at age eighteen, and she asked me how I felt about her. I wanted to be truthful with her, so I told her that I didn't love her as a girl should love her mother, but that I did love her as a child of God and that I would always make sure she was well taken care of. I followed through on that promise. I had truly forgiven her, but as you will read several times in this book, forgiveness is not a feeling. It is a decision we make about how we will treat the people who have hurt us.

The abuse during my childhood seriously affected my personality. I was controlling and afraid, but I pretended not to be fearful. I had a root of rejection (meaning that I was predisposed to think people would reject me or were rejecting me even when they weren't), and I was filled with shame, condemnation, insecurity, and many other negative issues. I also had an anger problem and felt the world owed me for the injustices I had suffered.

Forgiveness is a decision we make about how we treat people who hurt us.

When Dave and I had been married about three weeks, I had a temper tantrum over something minor. He looked at me and asked, "What is wrong with you?" He had begun to realize that under the surface something was indeed wrong.

Several years passed before I realized something was wrong with me. Until that time, I thought everyone else had problems and that, if those people would simply be more like I was, we could get along. Have you ever thought that if someone you were in relationship with were more like you, things would be so much

someone's life. I am living proof that this works, and I don't even want to think about how miserable my life would have been had Dave said no to God. He could have bailed out of the situation at any time, but he stayed. He has shared that he often sat in his car and cried because he simply did not know what to do. I'm so sorry I hurt him so much, but I am so glad he did not give up on me.

Having a desire to please God doesn't mean we will enjoy loving people who are hard to love. Remember, love is much more than a feeling. It is how we treat people. God isn't asking us to let people abuse us, but He is asking us not to give up on them simply because they are difficult to deal with. There are times when we cannot be with certain people because they are abusive, but

God asks us not to give up on people simply because they are difficult to deal with.

we can still pray for them and love them in ways that won't put us in harm's way. These are rare cases, and most of what we are talking about in this book pertains to ordinary people who for a variety of reasons are just hard to love.

It Started in the Very Beginning

People having flaws and faults is nothing new. All you need to do is read Genesis—the first book of the Bible, often referred to as “the Book of Beginnings”—to realize that. One of the earliest recorded stories in Genesis is about Cain (Adam and Eve's first son), who killed his brother, Abel, because he was jealous of him (Genesis 4:8). Throughout the book of Genesis, we see everything from polygamy to incest, drunkenness, lying, Joseph's brothers wanting to kill him, and Abraham having sex with his wife's servant (Genesis 4:19; 16:1–4; 19:30–38; 27:1–35; 37:18–20).

The people involved in these situations are people God used, so I guess this means there is hope for us.

It seems like if we are going to love anyone, it will have to be flawed people who are sometimes hard to love. But remember that we are flawed, have many faults, and are often hard to love also. Love is the greatest thing in the world, and it changes everything. Just imagine how different our world would be today if people truly loved one another. Is this possible? I would like to believe it is. In the natural realm, apart from God, it may be unlikely, but the Bible tells us that all things are possible with Him (Matthew 19:26). When we get to heaven, it will be a definite reality for us as believers, as we will enjoy an atmosphere of perfect peace and love.

I can't know or be responsible for what everyone else does, but I have decided that I am going to love people, and by God's grace, this includes people who are hard to love.

I am asking you to make the same decision, and I believe that if enough of us do it, it will impact the world in a very positive way.

Let your behavior be a sermon that people cannot ignore.

Practical Steps to Loving People Who Are Hard to Love

- Don't simply *try* to love them or assume you can love people who are difficult for you to love. Pray regularly that God will give you the grace to do so. Lean on God for His help, because without Him you will surely fail.
- Pray for the people who are hard for you to love. Ask God to reveal truth to them and change them. Ask Him to soften their hard hearts.

- Be a good example. Instead of trying to talk people into changing, let your behavior be a sermon that they cannot ignore forever.
- Be ready to forgive often—at least as often as God forgives you. Forgive them not because they deserve it, but because you deserve peace.
- Don't broadcast their faults or mistakes by spreading rumors or speaking negatively about them.
- When the opportunity arises, bless them in a practical way or help them when they have a need.
- Set an example. Treat everyone with kindness and respect, even those who are rude to you—not because *they* are nice, but because *you* are.
- Don't gloat (secretly rejoice) when they have trouble or misfortune.
- Be prepared to be patient, because truly loving them may take practice and perhaps longer than you would like.
- While you are waiting for your breakthrough, make good choices by treating other people the way you would like to be treated.
- Remember that what others say and do and the opinions they express are based almost entirely on their own self-reflection. Don't take things personally. Instead of becoming angry over people's words, choose to grow stronger because of them.
- Remember the saying "Hurting people hurt people." There is a reason people behave the way they do, and it is usually not because they want to. They are either deceived and don't realize what they are doing, or, like I was, they are merely acting out their own hurt or modeling behaviors they observed or were taught while growing up.

- Learn to ignore the drama, discouragement, and negativity surrounding you. Don't let it limit you or stop you from being the best person you can be.
- Don't let other people's behavior determine how you behave.

Remember the saying
"Hurting people hurt
people."

Tough Love

Loving people doesn't mean that we never confront them, but we should do so only as God directs and not just when we want to. While Dave was waiting for God to change me, there were times when he confronted me, but after the confrontation he continued to love me. He never once shut me out of his life or mistreated me because of my behavior. Those times of confrontation were very difficult for me, and I usually reacted in anger, but Dave wouldn't argue with me. His silence gave God time to work with me and help me see that Dave was right.

Dave remained the same no matter what I did. This is how God is, and it should be our goal too. He never let me drag him down to my level of behavior, but instead he provided me with an example to which I could aspire.

I realize that each person's situation is very different, and setting guidelines that will perfectly fit every situation is impossible. But if we are willing to follow His lead, God will guide us individually and customize a plan for everyone we deal with.

Can I promise that if you do what I suggest that the person who is hard to love will change? No, I cannot make that promise, because their will is involved, and ultimately they must make a choice. But even if they never change, you will be blessed because

you are doing what God wants you to do, and that is the most important thing you can do.

People Are Starving for Love

I don't believe there is a person on the planet who doesn't want to be loved. As a matter of fact, most people who are hard to love are the way they are because they have never experienced real love. They are dissatisfied and looking for something to fill the emptiness they feel, but often they don't know what they are looking

Most people who are hard to love have never experienced real love.

for, so they search for it in all the wrong places. Each time they think they find what they long for, they end up disappointed, and it only makes their behavior more challenging for those around them.

We can love God only because He first loved us (1 John 4:19), but when we have His love in our hearts, we can let it flow through us to other people. Everything God gives us should flow through us to others—His love, peace, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, joy, and many other blessings.

Loving people who are hard to love will be difficult on most days and seemingly impossible on some days, but God never asks us to do something without giving us the ability to do it with His help. Don't listen to the lie that it is just too hard, because if you believe it is too hard, it will be. You can do it because God is in you and He will do it through you. Are you willing to say yes to God?