Meeting Primer: Difficult People

An optional read-ahead and quick reference, about 10 minutes

The Stoic Fellowship Meeting Guide · Everyday Problems

Guiding Question: How do I stay decent toward people who make it hard?

At the Meeting

- **Today's reading: Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.1**. We'll read it aloud twice.
- **The practice:** Morning Preparation, in three steps.
  1. **Prepare.** Who might test me, and how?
  2. **Understand.** What might they believe that explains it?
  3. **Choose.** How do I want to treat them?

Difficult People

A family gathering is coming, and so is the relative who always finds something to criticize. You're already rehearsing comebacks.

Marcus Aurelius, emperor of Rome, prepared for days like this. In one passage of his private notebook, he reminds himself that he'll meet meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, and deceitful people. He doesn't stop there. They act that way, he says, because they don't know good from bad. They share his nature, and we are made to work together, like hands or feet. Getting angry at them, or turning away, works against that.

Preparing this way isn't pessimism, and it isn't excusing bad behavior. Marcus still judges conduct. He refuses to add hatred to it, so that he can stay decent when the day arrives. Justice, one of the four virtues, asks us to treat people fairly, including people we don't like.

For ancient texts, use any translation you like.

Optional Reading (about 8 minutes)

1. **Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.1** (1 minute) This is the passage we'll read aloud. What reasons does Marcus give for not being angry with difficult people?
2. **Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 42** (1 minute) When someone treats you badly, Epictetus says, they think they're right. What follows from that?
3. **Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 5.20** (1 minute) People can obstruct our work, Marcus says, but not our intention. How does he turn an obstacle into material?

4. **Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.18** (4 minutes) Marcus lists reminders for when someone offends him. Which one would help you most?

Think About

We'll prepare for a shared case aloud. Keep your own examples anonymous; you can use a made-up one.

- **Prepare.** Who might test your patience this month, and in what situation?
- **Understand.** What might they believe that makes their behavior make sense to them?
- **Choose.** How do you want to treat them, whatever they do?

Key Terms

For reference during the meeting. No need to memorize these.

Justice (*dikaiosynē*). Treating others fairly and working for the common good. One of the four virtues.

Ignorance of good and bad. The Stoics held that people do wrong because they mistake what is good. That explains wrongdoing; it doesn't excuse it.

Kinship (*oikeiōsis*). The Stoic idea that we belong to one another, and that our concern can widen from ourselves to everyone.