

Now Is the Time for Love:

Love is Patient

1 Corinthians 13:4

Sunday, January 9, 2005

This past week I received an e-mail from a friend of our church who, after hearing last week's sermon on love (from verses 1-3), commented, "I realize love should be the goal of our life, but you never actually defined love. What kind of love does the Bible talk about it? We speak casually about love for all kinds of things ... Don't we need to define love first?" He is right. The Bible doesn't just define love as a good feeling; it grounds our love in the character of God. So in verse 4, after saying that love is the goal of our lives, Paul unpacks what this Christ-like love looks like in practice. And the first item on the list is probably the last thing we want to hear – "love is patient." Now if you think you've mastered this one, let's just say a prayer and move on.

Patience Defined. In Paul's day there were many words for patience, but he chose a very specific Greek word – makrothumia, which means having a long fuse or, more accurately, long suffering. The word applies primarily to our relationships with other people. It is people that make us impatient, rushed, aggravated and frustrated. People can be so annoying! So we're called to be patient for the sake of others. A key Bible text here is Romans 15:1 – "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves ... for his good, to build him up."

Did you notice how other-directed patience is? I may want to blast my neighbor, I want to give him or her or them a piece of my mind, because they are too slow or inefficient or idiotic. But those who are walking in the Spirit say, "No, that would just do me good; true love seeks ways to build up my neighbor rather than tear him down." And one more thought about the word in 1 Corinthians 13:4 – it's in the present tense which implies a habitual state. In other words, we're not just supposed to practice random acts or patience; we're called to become patient people. So that when people think about us they say, "He or she is such a patient person. And they as a community of God's family are such a patient bunch of people. They are slow to get angry and frustrated. They are willing to suffer long on behalf people." Does that describe you? Does that describe us as a church?

Patience is not moral indifference. Let me add a sidebar: patience does not imply moral indifference. Patience does not mean an easy tolerance that merely accepts sin in our lives or in the body of Christ. If you read the whole letter and the follow the entire argument, you'll see that sin matters. In Chapter 5, for instance, there was a man who was sleeping with his step-mother. Apparently, everyone in the church knew about it, but everyone let it slide – they were even ready to bless it. So Paul does some spiritual butt-kicking: "Are you crazy? You're impatient with one another, splitting up into little factions, and then you're patient with blatant sin in your body." Patience does not mean we watch a friend slip into a callous, destructive lifestyle and then we shrug our shoulders

and say, “Whatever, friend, as long as it doesn’t hurt me.” As we’ll see a few times in this series, true love confronts us in our sin, but it does it with gentleness and patience.

Patience is so central to our journey with Christ. It just doesn’t cut it to say, “Well, I know I’m impatient, but I’m basically a good and loving person.” Sorry, but you can’t be impatient and loving at the same time. Nor can you say, “Well, I may be impatient, crabby, touchy, easily offended, unpleasant, etc., but at least I have a personal relationship with Jesus and I do a lot of stuff for the church.” Sorry, God isn’t just looking for people who say a prayer of belief in Christ and then perform many religious activities. God wants your heart (Mark 12:30); God seeks the renewal and the restoration of your whole person (Colossians 3:10-11); God wants to make you like Jesus (see Romans 8:29 – God wants us to be “conformed to the likeness of His son.”).

In the biblical story patience is linked with other key virtues and goals:

- Patience is linked with forgiveness (see Colossians 3:12-13). If you’re impatient, you’re also an unforgiving person.¹
- Patience is one of the qualities that makes unity possible (see Ephesians 4:2-3). If we’re not patient with one another, our very life together begins to fray and unravel.
- Patience is a mark of spiritual maturity and spiritual leadership (see 1 Timothy 3:3).
- Because it’s such a Christ-like quality and it’s so important to our life together, we are commanded to “be patient with everyone” - see 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

God’s Patience. For the follower of Jesus, patience isn’t just a good idea or a nice thing to do for us; patience is rooted in the character of God. In one sense, the entire history of the Bible, the entire story of our faith is a story about the patience of God. Repeatedly the Bible tells us that God is “slow to anger²”. The Bible tells us that when we look at Jesus we’re looking at God in the flesh and there is no greater picture of God’s patience than Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. Paul’s life story is a story of the patience of God (1 Timothy 1:15-16). The entire cosmos, all of creation and every single person on this planet lives and breathes every day because of the patience of God. Sometimes we cry out, “Why doesn’t God step in and stop this or that?” He will. He will create a new heavens and a new earth, and in the process he will bring judgment on this planet and on every human being – on you and me. But in the mean time He allows room for us to respond because he is patient with us and with all of creation (2 Peter 3:9).³

¹In one of his parables Jesus seems to connect impatience with an unforgiving spirit - see Matthew 18:21-35. The context – verses 21-22. The story: verse 26 – “Please be patient with me.” Note that same Greek word that Paul uses here – makrothumia or long-suffering. Verse 29 – “Be patient with me” - there’s the word again. An impatient spirit makes us unforgiving and bitter.

² See Psalm 103:8; Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; Joel 2:13; Nahum 1:3.

³ *If we consider the wickedness that there is in the world, and then consider how God continues the world in existence, and does not destroy it, but showers upon it innumerable mercies, the bounties of his daily providence and grace, causing his sun to rise on the evil and on the good ... and offering his spiritual blessings ceaselessly to all, we (will see) how abundant is his long-suffering towards us (Jonathon Edwards).*

Patience is notoriously difficult. Unfortunately, for most of us, patience cuts against the grain of our self-centered, impatient nature. For starters, none of us came out of the womb as a patient person. Have you ever seen a hungry newborn? Every time the baby cries he or she is saying, “You give me what I want, right now or I will make you utterly and inconsolably miserable.” Is that a picture of other-directed, build-your-neighbor up patience? Hardly. We were born impatient – that’s why theologians call it original sin. But it gets worse: we live in an impatient society. We value efficiency and speed often more than love. We don’t like slow. And that’s what so annoying with certain people: they’re slow. They don’t get it. They don’t move fast enough for us. Waiting slows me down and I don’t like to wait.

And it gets even worse: most of us have learned – usually from the significant people in our lives – sinful and dysfunctional ways of dealing with our impatience: (1) The aggressive route – I’ll let him know what I think; I’ll give her a piece of my mind. I’ll blow them away with my logic and my deep spiritual maturity. I may even quote the Bible, but I’ll use the Bible like a sledgehammer. (2) The passive route - “I don’t need this so I’m out of here.” We never deal with the issue in love; we just walk away and think we’re a victim. (3) The passive-aggressive route – I’m impatient, I’m frustrated, and I’ll deal with it alright, but I’ll do it in a sneaky, underhanded way. I’ll give a little jab here, a little dig there but they’ll never know how I’m really feeling. Or maybe I’ll just walk away and talk to someone else. Many of us grew up in families that practiced these methods. Let me say none of them reflect true Christ-like love. True Christ-like love is patient; it suffers long for the sake of the other, and it deals with frustrations in a gentle, straightforward, redemptive manner.

Patience Applied: How do we become patient people? “Love is patient” – it sounds so easy when it’s read on a beautiful summer afternoon at a wedding service, but then two years later, it’s so difficult to practice. And yet, patience is so intimately bound with the character of God, the lifestyle of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. So how do I grow in patience?

- First, I begin the journey to patience by admitting that I’m not there yet – and as a matter of fact, I’m a very impatient person. Christians call this confession or repentance, which means that I will be brutally honest about how far I have to go on the journey. In the Old Testament when the prophet Isaiah confronted the holiness of God, he cried out, “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). In the same way, as I see the patience of God for me and for all of creation, I can only cry out, “I am an impatient man and I live among people of impatience.” I can’t pass the buck and say, “I’m impatient, but it’s his fault or her fault or their fault.” A few months ago as I made snarled at another driver – a very slow and incompetent driver – one of my children commented, “Hey, dad did you ever notice that you’ve become much more impatient over the past few years?” *No, and have you ever noticed how disrespectful you are?* He’s right. That’s spiritual growth in the wrong direction. Perhaps we could blame it on the weather or Long Island or the current

administration or all those idiots out there. But we can't. We must own it, confess it, and be honest with God and others about this simple fact: I can be very impatient, touchy, easily irritated.

- At this point I may make a very crucial mistake in the spiritual life in Christ: I may say, "Yes, I am failing, so must try harder." Unfortunately, that just puts us back under what the Bible calls "the law of sin and death." We live under the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1-4). So patience isn't just a matter of trying harder; it begins by looking longer in the right direction. It means gazing on the patience of God and allowing God's character and love for us to transform us. Let me have Pastor Kevin explain what we mean by that ...

KEVIN JORDAN

1. The key to patience, as is the key to every other characteristic of love, is not simply trying harder, but looking longer in the right direction.

2. I get this from 2 Corinthians 3:18 (turn there, p.860 in the Pew Bibles)

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect (contemplate) the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

1st – This text tells us that all true followers of Christ have the hope of a real and vital transformation taking place in their lives.

- A transformation described as being conformed more and more into the very image of Christ.
- And certainly this pertains to our subject-matter this morning, because no person every exhibited patience and love more than our Lord Jesus Christ. So to be transformed into His image would be to be more and more exhibit patience and love.

2nd – This text tells who is the primary agent of this transformation in our lives is? And who is it? It's the Holy Spirit. *"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect (contemplate) the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."* In other words, such a transformation into a Christ-like person can't be manufactured by human effort alone. Rather, it requires the empowering agency of the Spirit of God at work in our lives. God has to do it. Which is why love and all of its fruit, including patience, is referred to in the Bible as *"the fruit of the Spirit"* (Galatians 5:22-23)—the outgrowth of the Holy Spirit's dynamic work in us.

3rd – This text tells us what the key is that opens the door of the Spirit's work of transformation in us. Look again at the text, *"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."* The word translated, "reflect" here in the NIV can, I believe, be more accurately translated, "contemplate." (Even the NIV recognizes this in a footnote). In fact, most of the best of contemporary translations reflect this.

For example, listen to the New Revised Standard: *"And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."* So, what's the key

that unlocks the door of the Spirit's transformation in our life? Let me suggest to you that it's contemplating, or, we could say, seeing and savoring, the glory of the Lord. According to this text, "*Seeing is becoming.*" In other words, the key that opens the door to the Spirit's transformation in our lives is meditating on the glories of the Lord Jesus Christ, including His glorious love. And the more we do so, the more we will find ourselves becoming like Him, which means the more loving and the more patient we will become.

You see, the key to love *is* looking in the right direction. We won't become more patient and loving by looking at ourselves, focusing on our sins and shortcomings, and striving somehow to overcome them. Nor is the key found in looking at primarily at others, straining to see them as somehow being deserving of our love. No, the key is gazing and meditating upon, seeing and savoring, the amazing love and patience of God in Jesus Christ. You see, as Christians, we are not called to treat people, based upon what they deserve, or how they've treated us. Rather, we are called to treat others based upon how God has treated us.

And, let me ask, how has God treated you? If you are a true believer in Christ, you have seen and you and savored the wonder and beauty of His grace and His amazing, extravagant love and long suffering toward you. And, you see, the more we meditate upon and contemplate the amazing love of God in Christ toward us and indeed all people, the more we will, if the Spirit of God lives in us, find ourselves reflecting His love toward others. Therefore, may the Spirit of God open the eyes of our heart to see the glory, and indeed the beauty of the love of Christ!

MATT WOODLEY

- As we gaze on the patience of God we become transformed into the image of Christ, the one who has patiently waited for us, the one who is patient with lost people, the one who is patient with all of his creation. The "we" is important. Did you know that you don't have to become a patient person all by yourself? No, the church, this church, is a community of people who band together so that we can, among other things, help, encourage, teach, and pray for one another about the specific areas where we struggle with impatience. So as we confess our impatience, we can and should have brothers and sisters in Christ who don't try to fix us or control us or shame us; instead, they pray for us, they hold us accountable, they'll call us during the week or send us an e-mail and ask us how we're doing in our journey of love, our journey to be patient.
- We need this desperately because in Christian community we know that everyone is "irregular." Do you know sometimes you can find merchandise in a department store that is marked "slightly irregular." The store is issuing a fair warning: "This is the department of Something's-Gone-Wrong. You're going to find a flaw. We're not going to tell you where it is, but we know it's there. If you were looking for perfection, you came down the wrong aisle. And there are no refunds or exchanges on these items. You take them "as is." As someone has commented, "When you deal with human beings in Christian community, you have come to the as-is department of the universe." Every person you meet in this church and in your family and that may be a potential marriage partner or friend or small group member is slightly irregular. They come with a little tag: *there is a flaw here*. So when you find it – and you will find it – don't be impatient and

disgusted; take it as God's assignment to grow in Christ-like love, to build community rather than to pull away from community, to work through the disappointment rather than running away from the disappointment.⁴

- When you enter into Christian community you will find irregular people everywhere. Some of them will be slow irregular people – those with disabilities; the physically weak, the traumatized, the sexually abused, the grieving, those who are struggling with addiction, those who are struggling with their sexuality, the old, the young, those who are depressed or who have eating disorders. In our impatience we may be tempted to respond with two of the most loveless words in our culture, “Hurry up! Move faster, heal faster, struggle less often, get over your grief, get your act together, learn the lessons. Hurry up!” Now I’ve already said that patience does not mean tolerance for sinful, destructive habits, so there is a time to confront and challenge (which we will discuss soon), but let me ask you this: how do you know God’s timetable for another human being? Do you want these people to grow for their sake or merely because they annoy and inconvenience you? “What wound did ever heal but by degree?” declared Shakespeare (*Othello*, 2.3.379). Will you be part of the grand healing process or will you just shut people out by telling them to hurry up?
- Personally, I find this to be an exciting time to be at Three Village Church because we’re having some exciting conversations about crucial questions: worship, men’s ministry and young adult ministry - reaching out to young adults and engaging a culture that is interested in spirituality but not the church. How do we do that? How do we engage our culture which is the largest English-speaking mission field in the world and the 5th or 6th largest mission field in the world? It require changes for us and even sacrifices for us and new strategies of ministry – but more than anything it will require love for “love is patient.” Are you a person marked by patience? Is this a community marked by patience?

⁴ Adapted from John Ortberg’s book **Everyone’s Normal Until You Get to Know Them**.