

“UNLIMITED PATIENCE”

Life on the Vine – Patience

Matthew 18:21-35 (p. 952)

What is it that tries your patience? Think of just one thing that gets to you, that makes you want to throw something, or chew someone out, or at least express your indignation in some way. Have you thought of one? Here are a few for starters. The salesperson who won't stop trying to sell you something, even after telling him repeatedly you're not interested. Then there is the person who interrupts you to complete your sentence before you've had a chance to finish it yourself – and gets it wrong! (Or the person who completes your sentence before you can – and gets it right!) Given time, I suspect we could come up with things that try the patience of just about everyone here.

I. “The fruit of the Spirit,” says St. Paul, *“is love, joy, peace, patience...”* Patience. The Greek word translated here as patience is “makrothumia.” The prefix “makro” means long or slow, while “thumia” is translated as wrath or anger. Hence, makrothumia literally means “slow-to-anger” or “long-wrathed.” So the concept of patience in the New Testament is wrapped around anger. (There is another Greek word translated as patience. But it has more to do with putting up with things, while makrothumia has to do with putting up with people. And since people are generally more interesting than things, we'll concentrate on the people-problems today.)

We find the Old Testament Hebrew equivalent for makrothumia in God's own self-description in Exodus 34. There God introduces himself as being, among other things, “slow to anger.” So if we're going to talk about patience the way Scripture sees it, we should acknowledge early on that anger is not simply part of human nature. It's also part of God's character. In fact, the Bible has a good deal to say about God's anger, about the wrath of God. These days, however, that idea isn't often well received. People generally prefer a more congenial sort of God.

But the Gospels make it quite clear that, on occasion, Jesus (who is God's perfect expression in human form) became quite angry himself. So before you conclude that anger is somehow sinful, remember that God, who is absolute righteousness, as well as Jesus who was without sin, both expressed anger. Sometimes Christians have the idea that anger is always wrong. But common sense and a fair reading of the Bible make it very clear that there are times when it would be wrong not to be angry. In fact, in his letter to the Ephesians Paul gives this piece of pastoral advice, *“In your anger do not sin.”*

That's not to say that all anger is either good or justifiable. True, there is such a thing as righteous anger. But there is also unrighteous, unjustified indignation. And given our sinful nature's inclination to do things for the wrong reasons, there had better be a way, a mechanism, a rule for Christians so that they will be angry at the right times, in the right proportions, and for the right reasons.

Fortunately, there is such a mechanism. In fact, it is one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit: "makrothumia" – "slowness to anger" – patience. In other words, when it comes to expressing your anger as a Christian, taking your time to get there is a virtue. And since that is also part of God's own character, when a Christian practices the virtue of patience, that behavior reflects something of God himself. That raises a telling question for us to ponder: When others see me angry, what does my behavior lead them to believe about God's character?

If we're taking our Christian faith seriously there had better be a correlation between God's way of handling anger and ours. And, of course, that was our Lord's point at the end of the parable we read this morning from Matthew 18. The hopelessly indebted servant had begged his master, "*Be patient with me!*" And the master did just that. In fact, he was not only patient, he forgave the entire multi-million dollar debt. But then that servant went out and confronted a fellow servant who owed him a few dollars. He throttled him up against the wall and said, "*I want my money now! Not next week. Not tomorrow. Now!*"

It's ironic that the second servant used exactly the same words in pleading his case (choking): "*Be patient with me!*" he said. But the first servant wouldn't wait, and he had the other thrown in jail on a work-release program. The unhappy but fitting resolution to the story comes with the master saying to the first servant, "*I cancelled all that debt of yours because you asked me for patience. Shouldn't you have done the same for your fellow servant?*" And the man was incarcerated for good.

Is there a correlation between the benefits that you and I have derived from God and the blessings that you and I extend to others? I'm not suggesting for a moment that we can reasonably expect ourselves or each other to be perfectly patient in all circumstances all of the time. Nor do I believe that patience springs, full-grown, in those who have committed their lives to Jesus, who have appropriated God's mercy and have received God's Holy Spirit. God knows how far short of the mark I fall as one of his children. But of this much I'm sure. God is at work in you and me, shaping us into the likeness of his Son Jesus. And one facet of this life I'm learning to live by the Spirit is patience – learning how to handle anger, specifically by being slow in expressing it.

2. Now, having talked a bit about what patience is, let's spend a few moments noting what patience is not. And I raise the issue of what it is not, because some of these misconceptions are not only common. At times, I'm afraid, they assume the

role of Christian virtues – a sort of grace by association. So let me mention three things that patience is not.

a. For one thing, patience is not repression. And for our purposes let's define repression as "a refusal to admit that anger exists." We've probably all had experiences with repression. Have you noticed how some people will talk to you about a certain situation, then they'll add, "*But I'm not bitter.*" You never mentioned the word. The idea hadn't even crossed your mind. So why did they volunteer, "*I want you to know that I'm not bitter?*" The reason is simple. They are hurt; they're upset, perhaps indignant. But they are not prepared even to admit the feelings are there. Unfortunately, Christians sometimes get the idea that to repress anger is to exhibit patience. They think that refusing to admit the obvious, pretending that what is – isn't, is the essence of patience. It is not. It is hypocrisy. So don't confuse repression with patience.

b. A close cousin of repression is suppression of anger. Let's define suppression as "trying to hide the anger you know is there." Most husbands know how this works. You enter the room and find a dark cloud hovering a couple of feet over your wife's head. Being an astute, sensitive man, you pose the perceptive question: "*Is something wrong?*" She replies, "*No!*" But from the measured tone of her voice, and her flared nostrils, you know perfectly well that something is wrong. So you decide to demonstrate that you're a man who's in touch with his feminine side by asking an even more perceptive question: "*Is it our anniversary?*" It's going to be a long, cold winter in that household.

The problem with suppression is much like that of repression. We sometimes feel, whether we're Christian or not, that if we can suppress our anger, internalize our feelings, that somehow constitutes patience. No, that is not patience, it's a form of Christianized self-abuse. And sometimes deeply rooted disorders are perpetuated and exacerbated by the mistaken idea that patience is the same thing as suppression of anger. It is not the same thing at all.

c. There's a third alternative often touted as a virtue, one that has been mistaken as a viable way of ensuring patience. And it has a certain appeal because it is so unlike either repression or suppression – and that is the expression of anger. In some cases we're encouraged to let it all out, to "blow off steam." And I can understand how, in a controlled environment with enough safeguards, that could be quite therapeutic.

Unfortunately, people often don't enjoy the luxury of those sorts of careful restraints. And sometimes when we blow up like that, we end up doing untold damage to those around us, including those we love, along with some innocent bystanders who may be in the path of our wrath. This form of anger therapy goes by many names, among them: domestic violence – child abuse – road rage – negligent homicide.

Sad to say, Christians are not immune. As we noted early in this study, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes our Christian lives as a kind of battlefield in which our sinful nature and the Spirit are *“in conflict with each other so that you do not do what you want.”* And in that confusion, we’ll sometimes attach a Christian label to violence and call it virtue. No, when we speak of patience as a way of handling our anger, especially with people, we’re not talking about expressing our anger any more than we’re talking about repressing or suppressing it.

3. No, the key to being slow to anger, it seems to me, isn’t repression or suppression or expression. It’s confession. Let’s suppose a certain person drives you up the wall. Or perhaps you’re in a potentially volatile situation. Whatever the circumstances, you find yourself getting angry. Now, you have a choice. You can deny that it’s happening. You can internalize it, and pretend that it isn’t getting to you. If you wish, you can blow your stack and maybe destroy the source of irritation. Or, you can choose to confess – to God, to yourself, and where appropriate, to the other person or persons.

When you find yourself getting angry, it is both within your rights and your capacity to say, *“Time out! Just a minute.”* Call things to a halt for a moment. Thomas Jefferson said, *“When angry, count ten before you speak; if very angry, a hundred.”* Or you may prefer Mark Twain’s version. He said, *“When angry, count four. When very angry, swear!”* (Yes, there is a place for humor, especially when you’re angry, a very important place.)

Once you’ve called a time out, it’s time to confess. First, say to God something like this: *“Lord of patience, slow to anger, I’m hurt. I’m getting frustrated. I’m irritated. I don’t like these people. I don’t like this situation. I’m mad. I need your help. You promised to help, so I’m trusting you to keep your promise; because I want to be your man, your woman, your child.”* Talk to God like that.

Then confess it to yourself, and I mean that quite literally. Say it out loud if it helps. (If you do that, however, I’d suggest you do so in private so people won’t question your sanity.) Say something like this to yourself: *“You’re really angry, aren’t you. So, what are you going to do about it? Deny it? Stifle it? Blow up? In stead, name one good thing you could do about the situation right now.”* Talk to yourself like that.

And then, if it is appropriate, confess to the person or persons involved. (Please notice that I did not say, *“...if it is easy.”* I said, *“...if it is appropriate.”*) Don’t be in a hurry; but don’t put it off either. Paul says, *“Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.”* Just try as best you can to explain what is going on. Say to that other person something like this: *“I don’t know if you understand,*

but I'm getting upset. I'm hurt. I don't want to go on like this. But I need your help." Talk to them like that.

In short, take the time necessary to deal with the anger. Patience is not denying, it isn't gunnysacking, it isn't exploding. It is being slow-angered (makrothumia). It looks for a way of healing by extending the anger – laying it out with measured speech and careful thought, to God, to yourself, and to others.

Do that, and do you know what you'll discover? You will discover that that blend of trust and obedience is productive. It will produce the fruit of the Spirit which includes, among other things, being slow to anger. What's more, when you learn patience, you begin to realize how remarkably patient God has been with you. Paul, you'll remember, had a hot temper. It got him into trouble on many occasions. The Holy Spirit had to do a major overhaul on that man's attitude. Eventually the Spirit succeeded. And Paul, older and wiser and far more patient, wrote a letter to his young friend, Timothy. In that letter he said this:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience that I might be an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

God, help me to be that kind of example to others. Teach me your patience.

αμεν

With gratitude to Stuart Briscoe for his inspiration.