

Love is Patient

2 of 11 in the series *Love Is...*

April 26, 2020

1 Cor. 13:4a

We live in an impatient world. I guess that's stating the obvious.

Some of you will be old enough to remember the days when you could rent a DVD and they would mail it to your house. That's actually how Netflix got started. At the time, people thought this was great— I mean, you didn't have to make a trip to Blockbuster anymore to rent a movie!

Those of you who are younger are probably like, "What's Blockbuster? And, "What's a DVD?"

Of course now getting movies is pretty much instant. One click and you're watching.

Recently, a study was done of 6.7 million users who stream movies. How long do you think the average user was willing to be patient for the movie to start streaming?

The answer is two seconds. Two seconds, and the movie had to be playing, otherwise, see you later. The study showed that if it took 5 seconds for the video to start, 25% of the viewing audience would drop off. 10 seconds, and you'd lose half your audience.

Buffering? Who has patience for *that*? People will be gone instantly.

So now that Cornerstone has ventured into online church and we're uploading weekly video content, no pressure at all production team! You have two whole seconds of leeway to make sure everything works the way it's supposed to. You've got this!

Today, we're going to talk about *patience*— something our fast-changing world isn't very good at, and that includes many of us as well. It often includes me.

We're continuing in the series *Love Is*. Over next couple of months, we'll be focusing on the Bible's famous love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13.

In verses 4-7 of that chapter, the Apostle Paul breaks down what authentic Christ-like love looks like, as well as what it does *not* look like.

The original Greek word for the kind of love that the passage calls us to is *agape*— and the ultimate embodiment of *agape* love is Jesus himself.

During the course of this series, we'll be making our way phrase-by-phrase through these verses, starting today at the top of the list with Paul's first "love is" phrase:

Love is patient... ¹

We'll unpack that phrase and what it means for you and me in just a few moments. But first, a bit of review.

Last week, Pastor Andrew talked about how 1 Corinthians 13 is the centre, the heart, of three chapters of teaching from Paul about spiritual gifts and church unity. Spiritual gifts refer to the variety of special abilities that God gives his people for ministry.

And Paul makes it very clear that all spiritual gifts are good and desirable—*as long as we're using them in love*.

But if we're not using our gifts for God's glory, in a spirit of Jesus-like *agape* that lays down its life to serve and bless others — if, for example, we're using our gifts to gain attention or a reputation for ourselves or any other self-serving purpose—then our ministry efforts become altogether worthless.

You can do the good thing, the inspiring thing, the sacrificial thing, even the supernatural thing, says Paul, but if it's not done in Christ-like love, it all amounts to a whole lot of nothing.

And this is true of more than just how we use our spiritual gifts. For example, some churches, in trying to assess how they're doing, ask questions like:

- What's our attendance like?
- How are our finances and programs?
- Have we moved into a new building?
- Do we have enough volunteers?
- And with the lockdown, many churches are now adding the question, how is our online ministry?

Don't get me wrong. Those questions certainly have their place, but if in doing all those things, we miss love, then they mean nothing.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:4a

Paul's message in verses 1-3 of 1 Corinthians 13 is that **life minus love equals zero**. If we don't get love right, there's nothing else worth getting right.

The ultimate criteria for assessing how we're doing as a church, and how you're doing personally as a follower of Jesus, is love. This is precisely why Cornerstone's Mission Statement is:

Making space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love.

As disciples of Jesus, the very centre— the core of our calling— is to let the *agape* of Jesus fill us, transform us, and flow through us to bless God and others.

In verses 4-7 of our passage, Paul gives us some specific signs to look for in order to assess the degree to which we are walking in love.

And the very first thing Paul tells us is that if you're walking in love, you're going to become an increasingly patient person. Because, Love is patient.²

Today, we're going to explore three aspects of biblical patience.

First, let's talk about.

1. The meaning of patience.

In our passage, the original Greek word for *patience* literally means *longsuffering*. To be patient is: To endure suffering and adversity with hope and stamina.

This pandemic is certainly a period of suffering and adversity, isn't it? For some much more so than others. Still, this season of adversity affects us all.

It's been weeks already, and it's not going to be over anytime soon. Even when the restrictions start to be lifted, the process is going to be very gradual, and rightly so. Lives are at stake, and therefore, love calls us to be patient—to embrace longsuffering for the sake of others.

Biblical patience is also: To remain emotionally calm and restrained in the face of injustice, inconvenience, and irritation.

² See again 1 Corinthians 13:4a

You may not have faced injustice during this pandemic, but how many ways have you been inconvenienced by the shutdown? And how many times have you found yourself irritated by something or more likely by someone over these weeks of isolation?

God desires to use our current circumstances as material to help us grow in patience, if we'll let him.

Because to become more patient in the face of adversity, inconvenience, and irritation is to become more like God himself. You see, there's no one more patient than God is.

I mean, just think of how God has been patient with *you* throughout your lifetime. Think of how God has been patient with you just this past week, or even this morning!

Of course, God not only bears with our own sins and shortcomings. He bears with the sin and brokenness of the entire world.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus doesn't just return to earth right now, clean house, and put an end to all human wickedness? The answer is that the Lord is patient. The Bible says in 2 Peter:

But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise as some people think [his promise to return and judge the wrong and set the whole world right once and for all]. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.³

That's why Christ waits to return as long as he does. Because God loves people, and wants to give everyone every possible opportunity to repent, to return to God and receive his forgiveness and new life through Jesus.

So God is longsuffering. He is patient. Why? Because God is love.

Which, again, is why God works so patiently with you and me. He loves us. And because God is patient with us, he calls us to be patient with others. Because you know what? He loves them too.

³ 2 Peter 3:8-9 (NLT)

As Christians, our job is simply to give away what we receive from God. We receive God's love, and we share his love with others. We receive God's patience, and we share his patience with others.

But that's not always so easy, is it? We've talked about what patience means. Now, let's have an honest talk about:

2. The problem of impatience.

Think of a time when you were impatient with someone. Get a picture of that. Now, what was going on in your mind when you got impatient with that person?

I think it's pretty safe to say that you were NOT thinking:

You know, Jesus loves this precious, precious person so much, and therefore so must I.

You weren't thinking that at all. Instead, what you were thinking—maybe not in so many words— but your *attitude* was probably something like:

How dare this person not cooperate with my agenda!
This person is failing to meet my expectations! Just who do they think they are?

You see, **Impatience always curves in on self**. It stems from believing that everything and everyone should revolve around me and my agenda. My frustration about the gap between my expectations and reality is called impatience.

C'MON! You're supposed to do it MY way. At MY speed. HOW I want it, WHEN I want it.

There's this system of personality typing called the Enneagram, which you may have heard of. I'm an Enneagram type 3, which means, among other things, I like to get stuff done.

Accomplishing things comes pretty naturally to my personality type, and when that's working in a healthy way, it can be a very good thing. But when I let that curve in too much on myself, I can become impatient with people or circumstances that prevent or hinder me from accomplishing what I've set out to accomplish.

I can also become impatient with others who struggle to accomplish their goals: "C'mon, what's so hard about just getting yourself organized and doing what you're supposed to do?"

Now I can be pretty patient with others in areas that I also struggle with myself, but when I impatiently judge others out of my strengths, I'm no longer walking in love.

Furthermore, it's easy to be patient when something means a lot to me. I'm a U.S. history buff, and last year on the way back from a trip to Washington, D.C., my family stopped at Gettysburg. It. Was. Awesome! I took my sweet time going through the museum, reading every little placard. And my family waited for me—patiently, for the most part.

Shopping, on the other hand, doesn't mean nearly as much to me. My main goal in shopping is to go into the store, get what we need, and get the heck out as fast as possible. Who's with me on that? I'm imagining a lot of guys' hands are going up.

My wife Jan, on the other hand, enjoys window shopping. Which I guess is good in a way, because at least it means she can enjoy shopping without spending much money. But sometimes I go window shopping with her, and when I do, how good do you think I am at being patient? Not always so good. Because I'm thinking to myself, why are we spending time look at stuff we're never even going to buy?

And I'll be like, "Honey, take all the time you want to look around, but do you mind if I sneak over to the food court and grab a coffee and read a book on my Kindle?"

You see, impatience always curves in on you and your self-centered biases. **Patience**, on the other hand, **is a matter of giving people space to be unlike you**. Which is what makes it such a beautiful expression of selfless, unconditional *agape*.

Impatience is no small problem, because not only does it harm others. To fail to grow in non-judgmental, Christ-like patience toward others amounts to showing contempt for all the patience God has shown toward *you*.

I know that's a hard statement, but it's true. Listen to what the Bible says in Romans:

Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?⁴

This should motivate us to grow in patience. How can we do that? Let me close by sharing with you a couple of:

⁴ Romans 2:4 (NLT)

3. Practices for growing in patience.

Almost no one can just walk out their front door and run a marathon at will. But many people do successfully run marathons by training.

You can't grow in biblical patience by just trying really, really hard to be patient—no more than you can complete a marathon by just going out your front door and trying.

And listen. To suppress your anger and bottle it up inside is not the same thing as patience. Patience isn't about denying your anger or stuffing it.

I mean, you may even have some measure of success in being able to fake patience, but that doesn't make you a patient person. God isn't calling us to be actors. God is calling us to be the kind of people who are actually patient, from the inside out.

So growth in patience is more about training than trying. Let me share with you two training methods for growing in patience.

The first and foremost is **prayer**. Maybe that sounds almost too obvious. But you'll never grow in patience apart from prayer. Author Henri Nouwen explains in his excellent book *Compassion*, that patience is closely connected with prayer.⁵ As the Bible says in Romans chapter 12:

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.⁶

Pray *for* patience, yes. But far more than that, deepen your prayer life, period. Why?

Because prayer is how you live into the fact that God is the source of your life, the source of your significance. Prayer is how you live into God's *agape* love for you, so that all of your heart's deepest needs get met through your relationship with Jesus Christ.

The more you relate to God through prayer, the more your life starts to orbit around him—he becomes your centre— and the less apt you'll be to expect that everything and everyone else should orbit around your agenda and expectations, which can be so biased, so curved in on self.

⁵ See Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, chapter 7.

⁶ Romans 12:12 (NIV)

So make space every day for prayer. In the process, pray for others, too—especially those you tend to get impatient with. As German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains, to pray for others “is to give them the same right we have received, namely to stand before Christ and share in his mercy.”⁷

Who are the people who are most often the victims of our impatience? Isn't it the people we live and work closely with?

For many of us, this dynamic is amplified all the more during these days of isolation. If you're cooped up with others during this historical time, it's so important to be praying for them. As you do, God will make you more patient with them, and will grow you in love.

A second practice for growing in patience is **visualization**. Prayerful, Holy Spirit-guided visualization.

Our imaginations have a remarkably powerful impact on our lives. All too often, we allow our imaginations to go down sinful paths. We entertain dark fantasies of lust, revenge, greed, and pride. This can really mess up our minds and set back our growth as followers of Jesus.

But what if—prayerfully and with the Holy Spirit's guidance—we actively engage our imaginations to see ourselves living and responding to others in Christ-like love? It can be a powerful practice that God uses to change how you actually respond to others in real life.

As New Testament scholar N.T. Wright explains:

We ask for grace to envisage situations where we could behave differently... Then, when we're faced with the relevant situation, we will at least have a choice which we have already thought about, instead of behaving as creatures of habit... [In time, loving responses can] become the engrained way we habitually behave.⁸

Picture those in your life that you have trouble being patient with. See their faces in your mind's eye. Imagine a situation in which you might be impatient with them, and see yourself responding to them with Christ-like restraint, gentleness, and grace. Maybe even envision Jesus standing behind the person.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 66.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *1 Corinthians for Everyone*, p. 174,

See yourself being patient in various scenarios like this. Make your visualizations vivid, and you may just find yourself responding more patiently to others in realities of everyday life during a pandemic.

We often let our imagination become an ally of sin. Why not make our imagination an ally of our growth in love—of our growth in patience. Because love is patient.

And life, minus love equals zero.

God bless you as you engage this week in practices that foster patience.