

1 Corinthians 13:4-13 What is Love?

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro
www.calvarydcmetro.org

You know how there's this running joke about never praying for God to give you patience, because if you do, you're just asking for bigger and bigger trials to come your way?

Well, this morning's message is all about how love involves being patient – so just imagine what kind of week my family had. It was challenge after challenge, and not any one thing, it just felt like everything in the world was against us - our schedules were thrown all out of whack. I defended my dissertation on Wednesday, successfully; we had a major home repair; a child in the Emergency Room – she's OK; my mother-in-law arrived – it's OK, we love her; and Mady worked the longest shift she's ever put in at Walter Reed on Friday, not because she wanted to, but because the situation demanded it. And those are just a few of the high points - it was just a bizarre week. And in the midst of it all we just kept telling ourselves, love is patient, love is patient.

Read 1 Corinthians 13 with me, you'll see what I mean:

1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 2 And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

4 Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never fails. But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love.

So, what's going on here? Why did we just read all this stuff about love? How does it fit into the big picture of 1 Corinthians?

Well, if you remember, the apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in the Greek city of Corinth – that’s why it’s called Corinthians, and it was one of several he wrote, so, specifically, it’s First Corinthians. And the Corinthians were having some problems in their church – problems getting along with each other because everyone thought too much of themselves.

So now Paul is talking to them about the supreme importance of love – that there’s nothing greater or more important in all of life - not even the most miraculous, supernatural experiences like speaking in tongues, or receiving prophecy, or divine knowledge compares to love. One day, in Heaven, all those things will pass away, but we will be loving God and loving others for all of eternity.

And that’s why God takes some time here to explain to us a little more about what love is, what it is like, and what it is not. And this morning, we’re just going to zoom in on one little part of it. We’re going to notice in verse four, the first words the Bible uses to describe love – “Love suffers long,” or as some of your Bibles say, “Love is patient.”

Does that strike you as interesting? I think so. I mean, if someone asked you to describe love, would this be your opening line? Love suffers long?

How might you describe or explain love? Chances are, you would probably talk about a feeling, or an emotion. Well, that’s part of what love is, but when God and the Bible talk about love, there’s almost always something larger in view. And so, right off the bat, “Love is patient.”

And patience, if you think about it, involves taking the long view. It’s the opposite of “I need it now!” It’s the opposite of the rest of our world where everything is getting faster and faster – more connected, more available, so you can do it or know it at any time from anywhere, you’re always in control.

No, patience says I see where this is going, and even though this is rough for a moment, it’s going to be worth it.

If you think about it, patience actually speaks of a degree of control. That even though you’re not content with the current situation, you’re sure of your direction and outcomes – it’s just going to take a little time.

When I think of patience, I think of it having at least two major forms. The first is patience with situations. Something is happening in life in general and you just need to ride it out. You need to be patient with your job application, patient with the housing market, patient with getting your permit and then your driver’s license.

If you’re in one of those kind of situations, and what you’re waiting for is a good, or righteous thing, then you just need to trust God while you wait. Remember that He is there, that He knows what’s going on, and remember that today He is making you into the man or

the woman that He wants you to be when the doors finally open for you. So, find something to rejoice in while you wait.

This is what Paul was talking about in Philippians 4:13. When he says, “[I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me.](#)” He’s not talking about working miracles or feats of athletic strength, no he’s in the middle of saying it doesn’t matter how things go, it doesn’t matter whether he’s in a good situation or a bad one, he can go through anything as long as he relies on Christ.

And so can you, Paul wasn’t some sort of superman – he had flesh and blood like you and me, he had a stomach and a temper, he had busy days and got bad sleep. But he sought God in the midst of all that, and the seeking made a difference. So, let it make a difference in your life too, especially as you wait patiently for your righteous desire.

The book of James says something similar. Can you turn there with me? James writes to his readers about some of the difficulties they are going through, and the way they are suffering even though they are righteous. He tells them that one-day those who have it so easy right now, those who are using their position and power and authority for their own benefit and hurting others in the process will be judged. And he says:

[James 5:7 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. 8 You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.](#)

Now honestly, that might mean waiting for quite a while. If you need to tomatoes, you can just run right down to the store and buy some. But if the farmer needs tomatoes he’s going to have to plant some seeds and wait – usually around 55-75 days and there’s not much you can do to accelerate that process. You just have to be patient. And be thankful you’re not growing chilies which would have you waiting for anywhere from 90-110 days. Or avocados. Did you know it takes seven years for an avocado tree to reach maturity and begin producing other avocados? And what do you do in the meantime? You wait seven long years without guacamole.

[See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. 8 You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.](#)

And when He comes, you can guarantee that all the righteous things you’re hoping and waiting for will be made right. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount,

[Matt 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.](#)

If your cause is righteous, if your desire is righteous, if what you want to see happen more than anything else, is for God’s will to be done – then wait for it, it will come. It might come

quickly, or it might take a while, but you have unlimited access to God and His comfort and to the community of the church while you wait, and that's no chintzy consolation prize.

So, there's patience with situations, and I wanted to talk about that for a minute, but actually, that's not at all what we're talking about in 1 Corinthians. No, remember the context there is love – and that means patience with people, which is something else entirely. In fact, some of us are going to wish we had just stopped at patience with situations and left this subject alone because if it's hard to have patience with circumstances, it's even harder to have patience with people.

And why is that? It's because the only time I really need to have patience is when things aren't going my way. The other person or people, won't do what I want done, when I want it done. I have to wait and I don't like that. I'm frustrated, I'm angry, I want to go, I want to stop talking about this, I just want you to do what I've said. I, I, I.

Have you ever noticed there's an I in the middle of the word sin? I know, that's spelling, not theology, but it makes an interesting point doesn't it? Well, have you noticed there's an I in the middle of the word patient too? Again, I know, that's just spelling, it's just English language, it's not Scripture, but it's sure a handy little device for the preacher to get your attention and point out that we only struggle to be patient when our desires bring us into conflict with someone else.

Now, look, my hope is that both you and I would grow a little bit this morning. I want us to walk out of here a little further down the path toward what God wants us to be and even more thankful for His patient, saving grace in our lives. But the truth is, a lot of us walked in here with a festering, cankerous, infected spiritual sore on our soul, and sometimes, before a wound can heal, you have to clean it, and that can hurt.

Folks, some things are going to hurt this morning. But I hope that's just the pain of God debriding our wounds, cleaning them, and not the pain of getting further infected or being poked and rubbed against. I have as much to learn about these things as anyone, so I want you to know that I feel your pain, I'm not just standing up here inflicting it.

So, going back to our point, *I usually need patience because things aren't going my way*. If I'm getting what I want, if there aren't any challenges or challenging people in my life, I don't need patience. 'Patient' describes what we should act like when there's a gap between where I am and what I want. If there's no gap, or if there's a bridge over that gap, there's no need for patience. I can just go right over there and carry on with my happy way.

And most of us have had seasons of life where we don't need patience. It seems like that season is often associated with your mid-twenties after things have come together a bit with school and work - you're making some money and you don't have the responsibilities of a home or children or supervising at work. Life's pretty good and you might not need much patience.

But when you get married, or you have children, or you have more children, or you have THAT child, or you have this boss, or these neighbors, suddenly you start experiencing some friction in your relationships. The commands of Scripture don't change – you're still called to love them, but now it's a little harder to do because *they* don't line up very well with *you*.

So, what do we do? How do we respond when someone presses our button, when we're called not just to suffer with someone, but to suffer l-o-n-g?

Well, there are two possibilities based on what's going on. In many cases, there's no real right or wrong at stake, it's just that the other person's performance isn't living up to your expectations. They're not doing things your way or at your speed. There's no sin involved, you just want things done differently.

In those cases, lower your expectations. Shift your attention to the other person, not you. The more you focus on yourself and your agenda or your schedule, the more frustrated you're going to grow. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. How much are you asking of them?

Let's think specifically of children, one of the great trials of patience in parents. There are times when they definitely need to focus and get with the program, but there are also a lot of times when it's just you trying to do too much, go too fast, or both. So, if you catch yourself losing your patience, step back and ask yourself, one week from today will this moment matter? Will what I'm trying to get done matter? And what about from the eternal perspective? Things can feel so intense right there in the moment, but if it all falls apart, or if it doesn't happen – big picture, what's the loss?

When people compete for speed – think of the 50 or 100 meter sprints in the Olympics - the track is flat, straight, and clear. The same is true with cars. Throughout the last century there was a quest to see how fast you could make a car go. Since 1935 they've done the majority of the tests in the same location – the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. And why there? It's because the salt flats provide a long, flat, smooth, course where you can drive 400 miles an hour without anyone or anything getting in your way. Now, why did I just mention that? Simply to make the point that part of going fast is having a clear course in front of you.

The problem is, none of us do when it comes to our daily lives. We're trying to cram too much into our limited schedules and we all know it. One of the consequences of that is that we wind up losing our patience with others because I need a nice smooth track in order to hit top speed but you, or this, or that, or they, keep getting in my way and slowing me down.

So, one of the most practical things you can do in your attempts to love people is simply to lower your expectations when you walk out of here this morning. Slow down a little bit, question whether this or that really needs to get done now, or can it wait? Put a little more margin back into your life and you'll discover it's a lot easier to love.

OK, but what if someone has done something wrong? What if you're right and they're wrong and you have to demonstrate patience with them as they keep making mistakes and blowing it? What then?

Well, that's when we need to remember the love God has shown to us, and specifically, the patience He has had with us.

2 Peter 3:8 But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. **9** The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

How much did you blow it before God got your attention? And He was longsuffering with you. But, He calls a duck a duck, and so can you – He says, “you need to repent or else you will perish.” Patience is not the same as permission. When we blow it, He calls out to us, tells us what we're doing is wrong, calls us to repentance, and keeps the door open for us to return. We need to do the same – call sin, “sin.” Expect the other person to repent, but then keep the door open for them return. And don't give them the stink eye when they come back to you – does God treat you that way?

Which leads us to our next point – back in 1 Corinthians 13 we're told “Love suffers long and is kind.” That's both simultaneously, not either or.

Now, don't you wish it didn't say that? But once again, isn't that what God does for us?

Eph 4:32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

God is not only merciful to us, He is also gracious. This morning, and every day, He is simply calling us to be treated this way by Him, and then after we've learned what love is, to show it to others.

But practically, how do I do that? Well, you need to know that it's going to be hard at times, and just because it's hard to be patient or to suffer long, doesn't mean you're doing it wrong.

Some people are wired to be naturally patient. I think I'm that way. I don't lose it very easily; I don't carry grudges. But that's just me, that's just how I was born, it's my natural temperament. There's a difference between being patient naturally and being patient out of Christian love. If you're naturally short-fused, but you're intentionally working on trying to be more patient, you might be maturing more than I am spiritually, even though on the outside it looks like I'm doing better than you – you get credit for trying to grow in Christ while I just cruise along.

So, don't be discouraged if you're actively trying to grow, or if it's hard to be forgiving and gentle. Keep going and keep asking God for strength. And as you stay connected to Him, He'll produce the fruit of the Spirit in you:

Galatians 5:22 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, **longsuffering**, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control..."

Paul prayed for the Christians in Colossae, that as they pressed in to God, they might be

Col 1:11 strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering **with joy**;

I'm sure of the fact that some of us need to repent this morning – God has shown us some things and we need to talk to Him about them. So let's take a minute and do that now. As the worship team comes forward and leads us in a closing song, take a minute to respond to God – ask for forgiveness for your impatience; thank Him for His patience with you; and ask Him for help in showing that patient love to others.

And maybe you need to talk with someone about that – if so, make sure you do it before you leave – talk to a friend, talk to one of the pastors – share what God is doing in your life, and let's all keep repenting, learning, growing and loving together.