

**There's an App for That:
Reflections on the Most Important Christian Qualities**

Patience

Proverbs 29:20; Matthew 18:23-35

July 4, 2010

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I've seen it in some of you—the patient, loving care you have given to a loved one. It takes a lot of discipline, control of one's own emotions, to feed someone day after day, to put their socks on, button their shirt, and brush their teeth, especially if the person is combative or abusive. I had a friend once who was caring for her elderly mother who was dying of a terrible disease. She told me one day, "David, my mother never used profanity. I never in my life heard her speak a word profanity, until last week. I was trying to feed her breakfast and she cussed me like a sailor." She went on to say that the disease had changed her mother's personality. She was no longer the loving, sweet woman she had always known. She had become mean, striking at her, kicking her, and verbally abusing her. And, of course, my friend knew that it wasn't her mother doing those things. It was the disease. She knew that, but it was still hard.

The natural inclination in a situation like this is to say, "Well, okay, Missy, you can just go without breakfast today! You treat me that way, and we'll see who wins."

That's why it takes discipline. That person who is cursing you and striking at you is still your loved one and still deserves to be treated with love, kindness and respect. She doesn't want to be dying of a terrible disease. She doesn't want to lose her personality. It takes great discipline to keep our anger and frustration in check and remember that that person is a child of God, created in God's image, and deserves love. That is why I tell people that the intimate, loving care of another person can be a spiritual discipline equal to prayer and devotional study. If we can do it in such a way that it honors God in that person, it is a spiritual discipline.

It is the fourth fruit of the Spirit—patience. Love is first, then joy, peace, and then patience. The Apostle Paul identified nine qualities that he believed ought to characterize our lives. He called these nine important

qualities the fruit of the Spirit, and that's what we're focusing on this summer.

Patience may be the one we've all been dreading. Our culture certainly doesn't nurture patience in us, does it? We have instant communication, high-speed transit, and fast food. We don't wait for many things these days, or at least we don't like to wait. So why is patience such a big deal? And what is it? Again, there is an app for that. This time it does not come from the last week in Jesus life. It is Matthew 18, one of the great parables of Jesus. Today we call it the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

Jesus told of a servant who owed a great debt to the king. This was no ordinary debt and no ordinary servant. The man may have been an upper level official in the king's court. He likely managed the king's vast financial resources. Possibly through mismanagement the man lost the king's fortune. Jesus said that he owed the king ten thousand talents. A talent was the largest monetary unit in their economy. It was equal to fifteen years wages for a laborer. Let me put this into today's dollars. If a laborer made \$40,000 a year, fifteen years wages would be \$600,000. That's *one* talent. This man owed ten thousand talents, a fantastic sum of money. Some speculate that that was more money than was in circulation in the whole country. Jesus' point was this: the debt was unpayable.

Jesus said that the man went to the king, fell on his knees, and begged. Listen to what he said, "Have *patience* with me, and I will repay you everything." This was an unpayable debt, remember. In no amount of time could this man have repaid this debt.

Jesus said that the king had pity on the man, released him, and forgave the debt. He asked for patience, and he received forgiveness.

But look at what happened next in the story. This man who had just been forgiven an unpayable debt came upon a man who owed him a much smaller debt. Jesus said that it was a hundred denarii. A denarius was a day's wage for a laborer. This was a debt of one hundred days wages for a laborer, about 1/600,000th of the debt this man had just been forgiven. This servant did and said the exact things. He fell upon his knees and begged, "Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything."

Jesus said that the man who had just been forgiven took the other man by the throat and said, “Pay what you owe.” Then he threw the man in prison, where he couldn’t work and therefore couldn’t repay the debt.

Now Jesus said that some others saw what happened, and they told the king. The king summoned the man who had been forgiven but who would not forgive and said to him,

‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

You know that this story is not really about a king, right? It is about God, who has shown divine patience with us. We owe a great debt to God, a debt that is unpayable. God has given us this beautiful world. God has given us life, loved ones, opportunities to be enriched, to do things that really matter. Neither you nor I labored to make the sun rise this morning. We’ve never created a sunset nor caused a gentle wind to blow through our backyards. And then God gave us His Son and the gift of forgiveness. These and others are all God’s gifts to us. We cannot repay God, and Jesus says in this story that no repayment is expected, except for this: we should be patient with those who “owe” us. Patience has been shown to us, so we should show patience.

It is the Greek word *makrothumeo*. It is a combination of two Greek words. The first word is *makro*, which means big or long, as opposed to *micro*, which means small. The second word is *thumeo*, which means temper or anger or wrath. The word *makrothumeo* means long tempered, as opposed to short tempered or having a short fuse. The word *makrothumeo* is sometimes translated as longsuffering. In I Corinthians 13, Paul said, “Love is *makrothumeo*.” Love is patient, longsuffering; it doesn’t have a short fuse.

Here’s what it means for us, and this is why I say it can be a spiritual discipline. Since God has been patient with us, we are under an obligation to not yield to our natural inclination and say, “Okay Missy, no breakfast for you today!” Instead, we are under an obligation to say, “Okay, you are a broken human being, just like me. And you are a person created in the

image of God, just like me. That means you deserve to be treated with love and dignity. You deserve my *makrothumeo*.”

Is that hard? You bet it is! Patience requires great discipline.

So let me give you this exercise for the next time your patience is being tried. It may be with your children, your spouse, a co-worker, or when you're driving on the Parkway. When something happens that causes that flash of anger, take a moment to analyze what is happening.

- First, try to understand why you are impatient. Maybe you're in a hurry, and you don't have time to wait for the person in front of you to return fifteen lampshades. That happened to me at Lowe's last week. Maybe you're under a lot of stress. Under normal circumstances, the kids' rowdy behavior wouldn't be a big deal, but the stress makes it worse. Or maybe you're angry. Your spouse forgot your anniversary two months ago, and you're still not quite over it. Try to back away from the moment and understand what is driving your impatience.
- Second, allow others to be human too. When I was at Lowe's behind the woman returning the fifteen lampshades, I was wondering why anyone would ever buy fifteen lampshades and then return them. Who does that! Well, truthfully it probably wasn't quite fifteen lampshades. And I've done things equally ridiculous. We're all human.
- And then third, remember what really matters. People matter, even people you don't know, like the clerk at the grocery store and the guy who pulled in front of you on the Parkway. People matter. And relationships matter. With our children, our spouse, our friends. Remember what really matters.

Love first. Then joy. Then peace. And then patience is the fourth fruit of the Spirit. It means to be long tempered, as opposed to short tempered. It is a conscious effort to honor the image of God in another person. It takes a lot of discipline, a lot of control over our emotions. It is a divine quality that has been shown to us. Now we are under obligation to show it to others. “Have patience with me,” a man with an unpayable debt begged. He asked for patience, and he received forgiveness. We have too. So let us cultivate patience in this church and in our lives this summer.

Closing Prayer

Patient, longsuffering Lord, we enjoy the benefits of your patient forgiveness every moment of our lives. Help us to give to others what has so freely been given to us. Amen.