

Sermon: 7-26-20 Love Is Patient
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The year was 1984, the music group was Foreigner, they put out a hit song called "I want to know what love is." It was a great song but it asks an even better question. What is love? What is love? I think most people really do want to know.

Last week we introduced that question and sought answers from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. There, in the thirteenth chapter, Paul said that there is nothing more important than love. Not that there aren't other important things. Knowledge is important. Giving and serving and sacrifice are important. But without love, none of those things matter.

This is not easy for most of us to understand, because most of us have never really experienced unconditional love. Most love is conditional, we love if... if we get what we want, if we have our way, if our needs are met. But that is not what God's love is like. God's love is summed up in the Greek word "agape". Agape love is unconditional. Which means that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. There is nothing we can do that will stop God from loving us and, conversely, there is nothing we can do that will cause God to love us more. God simply loves us. Why? Because God is love.

Which means that in the beginning there was love. God called us into existence out of love, that we might love him and love one another. Love is why we are here. Love is what we are to do and be. But again, that love is modeled on God's love. It is agape love, unconditional love. Which is a very different love from what most of us have experienced. Which is why we will spend the next seven weeks unpacking 1 Corinthians 13 and what Paul had to say about agape love. So, let's read Paul's description of love which begins in the fourth verse:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. — 1 Cor. 13:4

Paul begins by saying that love is patient. We have all heard that before. But just hearing it is not enough. As James says, there is a difference between hearing and doing. So, what does it mean for love to be patient? What does patient love look like?

It would be nice if we lived in a perfect world where we did not have to be patient. But, in case you have not noticed, our world is far from perfect. I know that my patience is regularly tested. I do not know what tests your patience by mine is regularly tested by four things that all start with the letter "I".

One of the things that tests my patience is **Interruptions**. You know what I mean. What happens as soon as you sit down to dinner? The phones rings and it is inevitably a salesperson or someone informing you that the IRS will take you to court if you don't send them money, immediately. Or I have a sermon that needs to get out to the worship team, and finally, after days of struggling to put two coherent thoughts together, I find myself on a roll. It looks like I

might actually finish on time. And then **someone pops their head around** the corner saying, "I know you are busy but I just need a minute...." Interruptions. They test our patience.

Then there are **Inconveniences**. Inconveniences are the little things that pile up, one on another, until they test our patience. Things like: intermittent WIFI connections that come and go; robocalls in the middle of the night; people who are constantly late for appointments; not being able to find the end of the roll of tape; a car that just sits there, unmoving, when the light turns green; and the list goes on. None of these inconveniences are big by themselves but as they add up, one on top of another, they test our patience.

Which brings me to **Irritations**. Irritations are similar to inconveniences. They are those little annoyances that pile up until they get under our skin. Things like long lines, jammed copiers, empty cereal boxes, misplaced keys, flat tires, occupied bathrooms, empty toilet paper rolls. Again, they are no big deal by themselves. But like the straw that broke the camel's back they add up one upon another until unexpectedly we just flip out. They try our patience.

Perhaps hardest of all for me is **Inactivity**. It's true, I would rather do almost anything than sit and do nothing. Just ask Lorraine. I have been known to spend an extra twenty minutes taking backroads to avoid waiting ten minutes in a traffic jam. At least I am moving. Anything is better than sitting and waiting.

Which means that few things frustrate me more than electronic devices. I got my first cell phone 16 years ago. Before that I had to find a phone to make a call. I had to go to the library and look things up in books. Thanks to my phone, I don't have to wait often, but when I do... If I ask Siri a question and she can't answer it immediately I get impatient. If I don't have a signal or if my device is not working the way I want it to I yell at it. How stupid, yelling at a phone. But that is what we do when we get impatient. "Stupid phone."

You can learn a lot about people, and their level of patience, by watching how they wait for an elevator. Some people are swayers; some are pacers and shufflers; others are pushers - they just keep pushing the button. Why? Like me that are impatient. Inactivity tries our patience.

Which brings us to a fifth thing that tests our patience. Yeah, I know I said there were only four and that they all start with the letter 'I.' I was wrong. There are actually five things and the last one starts with 'P.' The thing that tests my patience most is not a thing. It is **People**.

Do people ever test your patience? My guess is that if I had a huge whiteboard up here and I asked you what are the things that irritate you the most about other people we could fill it in no time. I thought about asking you to turn to someone you are with and share how people test your patience, but then I remembered that I would be listening to this sermon with my wife, Lorraine, and I am not sure I want to hear her answer. I already know that I test her patience.

We laugh, but this is a big deal because we have already noted that God created us out of love to love. God wants us to love the people around us. Indeed it is that love that serves as our primary witness to the world. And yet, when we are impatient it makes it really hard for them to notice Christ's love in us.

Let me ask you, when you encounter an impatient person is your first thought, “My, what a loving person, they must know and follow Jesus”? Of course not. We want to live lives that bear witness to God’s love, and yet too many times we destroy our witness by being impatient. I have seen Christians honk and honk at the car in front of them. I have seen Christians yell at a waiter because they were too slow. I have seen Christians push their way forward in line because it was not moving fast enough for them. The truth is that we all have things that make us impatient, and many times our impatience speaks louder than the cross we are wearing around our neck or the bumper sticker on our car. Which is why, when Paul decided to describe Christian love, he began by saying that love is patient.

The Greek word that Paul used to describe patience is ‘**makrothymia**’. It is a compound word. It is a combination of makro which means long or slow, and thymia which can mean heat, energy, or anger. Paul is literally saying love “takes a long time to boil over”. You have heard of people who have a short fuse. Paul is saying that loving people have a long fuse. They do not quickly show anger. More particularly, whenever makrothymia is used in the bible it refers to having a long fuse with people. makrothymia means to be patient with others.

Paul is saying that, if we want to exhibit God’s kind of love, we must take a long time to boil over in our interactions with other people. We need to be patient with them. So how can we develop more patience toward others? A good place to start is by simply breathing. When you feel your patience being stretched, when you start to boil inside, stop and take a deep breath. Focus on breathing in and out, in and out, let it lower your heart rate. Take time to cool down a bit.

Try it, will you? Take a few deep breaths, right now, at home. Focus on your breathing... on breathing in and breathing out. It takes our minds off our frustrations. It helps us to refocus on what really matters. It gives us time to think. It keeps us from saying something we might regret later. Take a few deep breaths.

And then pray. Say something like, “Lord, I feel like I might lose it. Help me not to. Help me not to say or do anything that might dishonors you or offend one of your children. Help me to be patient and loving.”

If it helps, pause and remember how patient God has been with you. As I was preparing this sermon I was thinking how nice it would have been great if Jesus had told a parable about God’s patience. Then it hit me, the entire Bible is a testimony to the patience of God. It is the story of a God who patiently puts up with stubborn, hard-headed people like me and like you.

Better yet, structure your life so that your patience is not tested in the first place. Add some breathing room into your life. Build up some reserve so that you are not running on fumes. Give yourself space. Make sure there is margin in your life.

Dr. Richard Swenson, an MD says this, “The conditions of modern day living devour margin. If you’re homeless we direct you to a shelter. If you’re penniless we offer you food stamps. If you’re breathless we connect you to oxygen. But if you’re margin-less we give you one more thing to do.”

How do we find space? How do we develop margin in our lives? It begins when we accept that we have limits. We have physical limits, emotional limits, mental limits, time limits, financial limits. We can't do and have and be everything. If we want space we have to build that space into our lives by pruning some activities from our calendars. We need to allow for the unexpected, build down time into our schedules.

Next, realize that others are people too. Be patient with them knowing that we are all human, that we all have bad days, that everyone has a back story, and that in the scope of eternity this thing or person that is frustrating you probably doesn't really matter all that much. I recall one Sunday as we were getting things ready for worship. It seemed like everything that could go wrong went wrong. I was getting frustrated, I was in serious danger of losing my patience when Marilyn Allen asked me, "Is anyone's salvation in danger here?" "What?" "Is anyone's eternal salvation in danger here? And if not is it really all that big of a deal?" Ask yourself that same question. "Is anyone's eternal salvation in danger?" And if not...

Finally, allow the Holy Spirit to rule and guide you. After all, patience is a fruit of the Spirit. If we are growing deeper and staying close to God, the Spirit will naturally guide us to become more and more patient. After all, that is what the love God calls is to exhibit is. Love is first of all patient.

Which, of course, is our scripture for today, the one I hope you read each day this week, the one I hope you memorize. 1 Corinthians 13:4 tells us "**Love is patient.**" Can you memorize those three words? But, you say, "I can do more than that." I know you can. You will have the chance to add to it as we go along. We will be building on this scripture over the next few weeks as we build our understanding of what it means to love unconditionally like God. But for now let's repeat, "Love is patient" together. And then let's go out and work on loving patiently this week.