

"What is patience?" A Sunday School teacher asked her class of young ones.

One little girl raised her hand and said, "Patience is when you are sitting in church and the preacher is preaching. You're just sitting there, and he is preaching. He keeps preaching, and you keep sitting there. That's patience!"

To some of you that might be your definition of patience too. Actually it is not too bad a definition, all things considered. Patience is a virtue and is listed as one of the fruits of the spirit which the Christian is to seek after. It is one of the more frustrating aspects to work on in the Christian life. Nonetheless, we all must try to have more patience as we live our lives.

But how do we obtain patience? Well, in terms of difficulty, to develop patience, there may have to be a learning point. For example, there is a story about a young mother who felt she lacked patience in her life. She asked God to help her develop patience. Well, the next week, her washing machine, and then her dryer broke down. She reports that doing laundry by hand with little ones surrounding her, certainly provided the opportunity to work on patience.

That story reminds me of a time in my sophomore year of high school when I was attending a Bible study with other high schoolers. A person asked the Bible study leader why somewhere in the Bible it says to be careful about praying for patience. The leader explained to us, "We had to be careful because the only real way to learn patience is to have enough trials, frustrations and long periods of waiting, to develop patience. How can God develop patience in a person if there is nothing to be patient about?"

Patience requires some amount of adversity for it to be actually used. For example, If I am told that someone is going to pick me up in an hour, I may have to wait around for an hour. But that is simply waiting. However, if after the hour, the person does not show up for another hour; well, that is when patience begins to kick in. Something occurs that wasn't expected.

We wonder, how am I going to get through this? That is patience.

During that situation we didn't expect, we could get angry or mad, or we can have patience and be understanding recognizing that anyone can run late.

Patience in this way makes one realize that flying off the handle when someone arrives late is not being patient whatsoever. The real fruit of the spirit known as patience has to do with reaction and understanding.

I know I don't often use the Greek words in my sermons, but today let me share with you about word used for patience in the Bible. It is "makrothumia." When you break down the term makrothumia, half the word means anger, and the other half means slow or long. Patience in this context means slow to anger or even handling anger slowly.

So let's consider Dealing with an unexpected situation where anger crops up.

One of the most common reactions to unfavorable situations and unfavorable people is indignation. "Oh that makes me so mad. I can't believe they did that. When I see them, I am going to tell them off!"

While this indignation may be understandable, and may even be justified, that does not mean it has to be our reaction. We may feel like that is the right reaction, and occasionally it is. But most of the time with this reaction which we may even label, "righteous indignation", what the person experiences may use other comments with a wide vocabulary to describe what is going on for them.

To such situations, Now enter the spirit of patience with the slow to the anger aspect . What this adds is that you will not get angry at the drop of a hat, and that when you eventually express your anger, it will be done slowly without a blow-up that hurts others.

The real image to keep in mind comes from God himself. Throughout the Old Testament there is a phrase used about the Lord. We use it often on Sunday mornings as words of assurance concerning God's forgiveness after our prayer of confession. It is found in Exodus 34:6, as God describes Himself to Moses, "The Lord the compassionate and gracious God, is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

So you see, God Himself models patience for us. God is gracious and God is slow to anger with us. How much more should we be gracious and slow to anger with the people around us? Who could be more justified to be angry than God? This makes us realize that if God is slow to anger with our imperfections, then we too can love others as we deal with their imperfections. This too is the fruit of the spirit, patience.

Let me give another word of hope about developing patience. I don't want you to come away from today feeling like: "I can't develop patience, because I am not going to ask God for trials and hardships to endure." Let me say that there are other ways to develop our patience besides the painful process of enduring frustrations and difficulties. This is where our text from Hebrews for today comes in.

In Hebrews 6, the writer speaks about maturity in the Christian life. Maturity helps us gain insight into the whole picture of the Christian life. There are certain fundamental teachings that are essential for all believers to understand. They include the importance of faith, the meaning of baptism, the facts of abundant life, resurrection and eternal life that Jesus brings. To go on to maturity means that we take on these rudimentary aspects of the Christian life, and seek after living the Christian life with our attitudes and actions.

In a Lenten devotional written by members from the church in Erie I served, there was an illustration about this area of patience. As I looked over the devotions, I came across one written by one of the teenagers of the church. It talked about how glad he was to have met Jesus, and what a difference he makes. It was a good devotion. Yet I noted the difference between that devotion and the ones written by the older members.

The older members had been Christians a lot longer. They talked about an enduring faith. They spoke about insights into God's action throughout their lives. Their devotions too were filled with hope and a message of God's love in Jesus. The difference in perspective is what I noted most, because they were considering the long haul of the Christian journey.

That is part of what the writer of the Hebrews is talking about in verses 11 & 12. It reads, "We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised."

Patience has an element of endurance and a keeping of the long haul perspective. One of the best ways I know to develop patience is to look at things with a view to the long term. It is true for projects you are involved in and it is true for people. Then when a frustrating aspect of life confronts you, you can think about, how will my reaction to this affect the circumstances of the future? Will my reaction matter and make a difference weeks from now?

An example of this is when a child picks up a habit that we would prefer the child not have. Perhaps some older kid taught him, or in his experimentation about the words he picked up from school mates, he uses it and we are not happy with it. We will react, but how? We could react in anger and blow the whole thing out of proportion thus making it a real issue and a way for the child to get to us. Or we can be patient and recognize that it may be a phase that the child will grow out of or forget about.

Patience in this instance, allows for the matter to unfold in one of two ways: either the habit changes after a time period when patience may work, or later the habit must be addressed since it is not going away. But at least then we have been patient, slow to anger. And hopefully we can deal with it in a way that has abounding and steadfast love.

Where have we heard that slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love before? Oh yeah, that is how God works. Which brings me to a time of closing for this sermon. Patience is a process. It involves the way we react to frustrations and adversity. There may be some anger involved, but if we allow a full understanding of patience, we can know that this should be seen as a time of slow to anger. Any given situation is best handled by looking at the long haul, and realizing that those who live with faith in God, can develop patience.

Hear again the words from Hebrews 6:12 "We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised."