

Love is Patient

1 Corinthians 13:4

BI: If you want to maximize your impact on the church and the world, start by loving people with self-denying patience.

I think it is safe to say that every true Christian desires to be used of God to accomplish some good for His church. When we consider all that He has done for us, it just makes us want to respond to Him in grateful, thankful, faithfulness. Moreover, it fills us with a desire to be useful to His purposes. We want to please Him by playing some significant role in His divine plan.

Hudson Taylor, the great 18th century missionary to China expressed such sentiments in a journal entry reflecting on when he was a new believer at age 16. He writes:

Not many months after my conversion, having a leisure afternoon, I retired to my own chamber to spend it largely in communion with God. Well do I remember that occasion. How in the gladness of my heart I poured out my soul before God; again and again confessing my grateful love to Him who had done everything for me - who had saved me when I had given up all hope and desire for salvation - *I besought Him to give me some work to do for Him, as an outlet for love and gratitude; some self-denying service, no matter what it might be, however trying or however trivial; something with which He would be pleased, and that I might do for Him who had done so much for me.* (Hudson Taylor, Bethany House Publishers)

I have no doubt that the believers in Corinth, too, wanted to make an impact on the world for God, but they were going about it all wrong. They thought that the power of their ministry was in their spiritual giftedness. As a result, those who had what were perceived to be the greater gifts were elevated in status in the church, while those who were given what were perceived to be the lesser gifts were disenfranchised and pushed to the fringes of church ministry.

Paul however, is determined to correct such fallacious and divisive thinking. As Dr. Wayne Mack writes, “The Corinthians needed to learn that the ultimate purpose for which God gives spiritual gifts to His people, whether ordinary or extraordinary, is not to exalt the person who has them or to impress or entertain others. The ultimate purpose... is that the body of believers might be built up in love.”

The Corinthians had completely missed the point. They had turned their spiritual gifts into a license for self-exaltation and showmanship. They thought that making an impact on the church for God required great power, wisdom, ability, and highly refined skill. But this is not God’s way. So Paul says (12:31) “I will show you a more excellent way.”

It’s significant to note that the word for “excellent” here is the GK word *hyperbole* from which we get the English word “hyperbole.” It means “over the top”, “exceedingly great”, “goes beyond great.” It is taken from the word *hyperballo* which means “to throw beyond, or overthrow.”

Paul is saying, I will show you a way to make an impact on the church and the world around you that *far exceeds* your current approach to ministry. It is a more excellent way.

What is the more excellent way to make an impact on the world for God? It is none other the way of love. In fact, in the first three verses of chapter 13, Paul tells the Corinthians that apart from the motivation and goal of true biblical love, the ministry generated by their giftedness doesn't amount to a hill of beans. For example, he says (v.1) If I have the miraculous ability to go anywhere in the world and speak any language, that gift would be worthless if it was not motivated and empowered by love. I would be nothing more relevant than a noisy gong and a clanging symbol.

Then again (v. 2), Paul says, if I was gifted to be the greatest prophet that ever lived on the earth and had the ability to understand all mysteries and know everything there is to be known, and if I have more faith than anyone else in the world but don't have love, I would be personally irrelevant to the cause of Christ.

Finally he says (v. 3), even if I give all my possession to the poor and die a martyr's death, if I do that for any reason other than love for God and love for people, it profits me nothing.

You see, beloved, Paul is teaching us that having a life that is permeated and motivated by real love is far more important than any extraordinary spiritual gift we could ever possess. And consider this: It is apparently possible even for unbelievers to possess supernatural abilities. Jesus said that there are many who say to Him on the day of Judgment, "'Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me.'" (Matt. 7:22-23).

Even unbelievers can have powerful gifts, but what makes Christian's extraordinarily powerful in their ministry to the church and to the world is the ministry of self-sacrificial love.

Now, if this is true than wouldn't you agree that it is eminently important for us to know what love is? What kind of love is so powerful in the hands of God that it far surpasses the impact that can be made by the greatest spiritual gifts? That's an important question because one day we will each stand before God and the only thing that will matter on that day is whether or not I lived in a manner that was pleasing to the Lord.

So what is love?

Last week I offered you what I believe is a biblical definition of love. Let's say it together: "Love is giving whatever I have that you need because God wants me to." This is an excellent definition, but Paul makes it even more practical for us.

I. Love is a Verb:

1. First, we need to understand that in verses 4-7 Paul lists for us fifteen positive and negative descriptions of love. But rather than offering us scholarly and sterile definitions, Paul simply tells us what love does and what it doesn't do.

2. On the positive side, love is patient and kind. On the negative side, love is *not* envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, selfish, easily angered, resentful, or joyful over wrong-doing. Finally (back

on the positive side) love rejoices with the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

3. Contrary to what the world thinks, love is patently *NOT* a feeling. Love is all about action. It is about evaluating a circumstance and then choosing to act on another's behalf for their good. On some occasions it means choosing to *do* certain things for their good, like exercising patience and kindness; to rejoice with them, to bear with their faults, to believe them, and hope for the best for them. On other occasions it means refraining from doing what our sinful hearts desire that will cause harm. Sometimes that means restraining envy, arrogance, a bent toward rudeness and selfishness. It may mean keeping our anger under control and not allowing ourselves to be resentful, or smiling when they get hurt.

4. Now, can I ask you a question? Do you find these things easy or difficult? When your deceitful heart wants someone to get out of your way, or you are tempted to say something slick to cast yourself in an impressive light, is it easy or difficult to keep that under control? I don't know about you, but I find it hard!

5. What's the lesson? The lesson here is that love isn't easy! In fact, apart from the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, I submit to you that this kind of love is impossible. Nobody lives can live like this without supernatural help.

6. The good news is, however, that you are no longer on your own. If you are a child of God, you are in Christ. And that means that not only has your status changed (you've taken a serious step up), but you assets have changed as well. Now all Christ's assets belong to you. Or, as Paul says it so simply, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

7. So the first thing we need to know is that love is a verb. It is an active thing that requires more than we can give apart from Christ.

8. Dr. Mack suggests to us that love is like a many-faceted diamond and each facet is specifically designed to reflect the beauty of God's love. Now, let's look at the first facet of true, biblical love. If you want to have a powerful impact on the world around you, where should you begin?

II. Love is Patient:

1. In the New American Standard, and in the English Standard Version (ESV), the verse says, "Love is patient." The Gk. word here, however, is *macrothymeo*. This is actually a compound word made up of the word *macro* = long, and *thymeo* = to suffer. The word "Patient" then, is more literally translated "long-suffering." In fact, the KJV and the NKJV gets it spot on when it says "*Love suffers long.*"

2. Now I don't know about you, but I'm not a good sufferer. I don't like to suffer, I'd rather not suffer, If I have to suffer I hope it won't last very long. But the problem Paul is dealing with is the fact that often we believe that other people are the cause of our suffering! Paul chooses this word to describe a calm and gentle response to the kind of suffering, pressures, difficulties, or injuries that are cause by people, not circumstances" (Mack. 34).

3. Jonathan Edwards, in his classic work *Charity and its Fruits*, suggests that Christians "should be willing to suffer injuries without doing anything to get revenge either with injurious deeds or bitter words. It means we will bear the injuries of others without losing the quietness and repose of our own hearts and minds—that when we are injured we will be willing to suffer much for the sake of peace, rather than do what we have the opportunity and perhaps [even] the right to do in defending ourselves" (Mack 34).

4. You see why I said that this kind of love requires the indwelling Holy Spirit? This kind of love is something the world knows nothing of. But it is the kind of love that should mark all of our lives. We should be willing to suffer a long time without striking back.

5. This was apparently a brand new concept for many in Corinth. You will remember back in chapter six, Paul rebuked them for filing law suits against one another. Do you remember what his prescription was? He said, "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?" You mean, just let it go? Just let them get away with doing wrong? Yes. God makes no allowances for bitterness, resentment, or revenge.

6. This is the way Jesus lived, isn't it? Listen to the way Peter describes the way Jesus responded to His suffering at the hands of men. Peter says (1 Pet. 2:23) "while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously."

7. That's what it means to be long-suffering. That's what it means to love. Love is patient!

8. As I was studying this week and seeking to apply it to my own life, I was shocked at how many times I found myself becoming impatient with other people. How many times did I say out loud, "Love is patient."

I got impatient when it was time for dinner and the kids didn't come immediately when I called, and the H.S. kind of poked my conscience and I said out loud to myself, "Love is patient."

When that guy in front of me in the intersection was still not moving when the light had clearly been green for at least two seconds, I found myself saying, "Love is patient."

Then I got thinking about when I got that letter from that young believer who was making accusations and judging my motives didn't have hardly any of the facts... and I fired back that harsh, "don't mess with me - I'm a pastor" letter.

And I got to thinking; you know, maybe I'm not as loving as I think I am. Maybe my ministry lacks the power and the impact God wants it to have because I often don't love people God's way.

9. What about you, beloved? How will you respond when you perceive that someone has caused you harm? What words should come to mind?

When someone is unfair or bends the rules in an ultimate Frisbee game? What should you say to your soul? Love is patient.

When someone makes a promise but fails to keep it? Say it with me: Love is patient.

When you discover someone has gossiped or slandered you: Love is patient.

When someone under your authority is disrespectful. Love is patient.

When you get blamed for something you didn't do. Love is patient.

When you come home and dinner isn't ready. Love is patient.

When your husband comes home from work and complains about the house or the kids: Love is patient.

10. One of my favorite stories from church history is the story of Charles Simeon. He was the pastor of Trinity Church in Cambridge, England in the late 17 and early 1800's, but he was hated by many for his non-conformist views. When the board made him senior pastor of the church, most of the congregation didn't want him. They preferred the secondary pastor who would preach the early service. When that service ended, the congregants would lock their pews so the people who came to hear Simeon preach had to stand in the aisles. In fact, this is how Simeon held church services for 14 years.

He was so hated for his evangelical views that any student of Cambridge who was found to have spent any time with him was branded as a Simeonite. This made it so difficult for Simeon to fellowship with others that in one journal entry he writes about how he recalled the sweet memory of having walked with one of the students enjoying a quarter of an hour of fellowship one year ago.

In all of this, Simeon never responded harshly or bitterly, but simply kept doing what He knew God had called him to do in ministry regardless of the response. When he was 71 years old, he was asked by his friend Joseph Gurney, how he has surmounted persecution and outlasted all the great prejudice against him for 49 years. His response to Gurney was, "My dear friend, we must not mind a little suffering for Christ's sake."

11. What's the message? Love is patient. It is long-suffering. If you want to maximize your impact on the church and the world, start by loving people with self-denying, Christ-exalting patience.