

IT TAKES PATIENCE

(First in the series: Building Great Relationships)

Text: I Cor. 13:1-13

5/16/10

Introduction

I'm nervous about preaching on this text, because the moment you read it everyone has suddenly mentally left for a wedding. In our minds we associate this text with two earnest, sweaty-palmed people who are ready to promise each other the world and who sincerely believe they can deliver it.

Never mind for a moment that a wedding was the furthest thing from the Apostle Paul's mind when he wrote this scripture. Somewhere we have decided that the love of which it speaks only stands a chance if protected by the romance and emotion of marriage. It's as if our everyday hands have become too calloused and our everyday lives too compromised to handle so delicate a thing.

But this is not a text about marriage. It is a text about relationships. Common relationships among people who share a common faith. So I invite you to shake the rice or birdseed out of your hair, wipe the wedding cake off your lips, and put your unwashed hands on a description of love that was never meant to be limited to romantic and sentimental moments.

For the next few weeks we are going to talk about "love" as the key to great relationships, and not just intimate ones.

I.

Paul was writing a letter to a church full of people who were sure that the secret to life together was claiming your God-given uniqueness, and making sure other people were paying attention. He doesn't deny that they are unique or gifted. He does say that's not enough. There's a better way, "a more excellent way", to live together.

If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but have not love... Paul is challenging these gifted folk to love each other. But he is not inquiring how they feel about each other. He's not wondering how much warm and fuzzy sentiment is flowing through their hearts in their private moments.

He's concerned with how they are behaving toward each other. The Bible defines love in different ways - in terms of affectionate friendship, parental love, or sexual attraction. But not here. No this "love" (the word "agape") refers not so much to what is going on inside of them as to what is happening between them. Love equals "relationship" and all the actions and behaviors that make it a loving one. Beginning in verse 4 Paul lists 16 verbs, 16 descriptions of love in action. He's going to show them a more excellent "way", not talk them into a better feeling. And for the next few weeks we are going to explore that "way" of living with each other. With our church members, with our neighbors, with our children, and even with our spouses.

At the top of the list we find the expression, *Love is patient...* one side of the coin that also tells us *love is kind*. What does that mean? The King James Version may translate it best, "Love suffereth long." Love bears other peoples burdens. Love endures other people's flaws. Love puts up with a lot of stuff!

"My relationship with "x" is marked by the willingness and capacity to put up with a lot of stuff." "Patience" isn't much of a virtue when people leave me alone; it's supposed to be character of my life when they don't.

Patient love is to be a mark, a distinguishing characteristic of how God's people live with each other in the midst of an impatient, self-seeking world. I'm willing to be interrupted; I'm willing to be burdened by the reality of other people's lives. That's the new normal that marks off Christian living from living that isn't.

II.

We're God's people. It's hard to sit in a church and not to be in favor of love. But how really excited are we about practicing patient relationships?

Relationships of depth are rarely easy. A writer once said:

That all men should be brothers is the dream of people who have no brothers.

To put a finer point on it humorist Barbara Johnson wrote some years ago:

Patience is something you admire in the driver behind you, but not in the one ahead.

We like to receive patience because after all our flaws are perfectly understandable. We not too keen on extending it away because other people's shortcomings are perfectly ridiculous.

Patience, forbearance, longsuffering is a chore because it means entangling ourselves with the inconsistency, inconvenience, imperfection, and hesitation of other people. Who drives home from work at night in high hopes of involving themselves in the untidy, unfinished business that is so often part of living in Christian community – whether it's at church or at home?

Not only that we've spent most of our lives being taught that we really don't need to. We live in a nation that has raised individualism to an art form. Narcissism is a national virtue. Our duty is to maximize our personal potential. We should choose relationships that move us up the ladder. We should avoid or abandon those that don't.

I have a vivid memory from my last congregation of being greeted by a man at the door after worship. He said, "I love visiting your congregation, but I'll never join it." "Why not?" I asked. "Because some day you'll disappoint me and this just make it easier to leave." Keep the relationships at arms length and keep your options open.

Love other people patiently and you are surrendering control of part of your agenda. *Love is patient* could just as easily be translated "real relationships are sloppy." They never quite go like we expect.

Patience is a difficult form of love for people who are confident they know what is best is for themselves, and best for other people, and simply want the freedom to get on with it.

III.

So where shall we find this patience that scripture says we shouldn't live without? How do you do, what deep down inside, you may not want to do?

Well first, don't think that the secret is "try harder". "Love is patient, love is kind" isn't first a description of our love. It's a description of God's.

In Romans 2:4 Paul asks people who are quick to judge others:

Or do you show contempt for the riches of (God's) kindness, tolerance, and patience not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

It is the character of God to be patient toward us, to put up with us, to woo us toward a change of life.

Jesus, in the parable of the unmerciful servant, tells a story of a man who owes a king an enormous debt he cannot pay. *"Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. (Matt. 18:26-27)*

It's the nature of God the king to be patient, to put up with, to forgive imperfect people who cannot pay what they owe.

But when the one who was shown the patience of God refuses to extend it to a brother who owes him, the king asks:

Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?

The thought's pretty clear isn't it? God's looking for imitators. But having patient relationships with our brothers and sisters will always be a source of frustration for us unless we know in the depths of our soul that God has borne the burden of our lives. God has put up with us. And it was burden all the way to the cross. But the question has to be answered personally, "Has God put up with you?"

Being patiently loved by God is the only hope of loving patiently like him. We're not being asked to be heroic. We're being asked to extend a bit of the grace that has been extended to us to our brothers and our sisters.

IV

And if we were to practice patient love in our relationships what would it look like? What might happen?

First, doesn't it simply mean bearing the uniqueness, the difference that comes with other people? God made introverts and extroverts, thinkers and feelers, engineers and artists, justice seekers and peace keepers. We look into our Christian community (not to mention our world) and before long we say "that person's not my cup of tea."

If you're not a Christian that's the end of the discussion. The sociological truth that "birds of a feather flock together" is good enough. Go hang with your crowd.

But if you are a Christian it isn't good enough. *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (Eph. 4:2)* Jesus Christ died to create a community of men and women who in their relationships would learn to tolerate, and even come to love, the things that divide much of the world into islands of difference.

But it isn't just the uniqueness of each other we have to learn to bear. It's also our sins.

Not all difference is good or healthy. Put a group of Christians in a room, give it a little time, and there will be sin. Offense will be given and it will be taken. That's no surprise.

The test of our relationships (and a Christian community) is what happens next. Can those who have been shown the patient forgiveness of God show it to each other? Can we bear each other's imperfection?

I'm not saying that we never speak a word of correction or challenge. But are we as willing to quickly, and often silently, forgive each other, as we are to attempt to fix each other? Forgiveness is the service we render to each other, knowing that in time it must be rendered to us.

V

Love is patient. Some years ago a preacher told a story about sitting at a lunch counter at a diner.

Three minutes had elapsed. Waitresses passed me by; two cooks and a busboy took no notice of my presence. My ego was soothed only by the truck driver seated next to me who was also ignored.

“Maybe this counter is off-limits,” I said to him. “Maybe they are short of help,” he responded.

“Maybe they don’t want our business,” I said. “Maybe they are taking care of those at the tables,” was his reply.

The clock ticked on. “Maybe they don’t like us,” I insisted. “The air conditioning feels good so I don’t mind waiting,” he said. At this point a harried waitress stopped to tell us that the water had been cut off and the dishwasher was not functioning.

The nameless man smiled, thanked the waitress and left. I did not like him. Only later did I realize that he had chosen to practice what I preach.