

Christian Virtues Series: Patience Col. 3:12-14; Gal. 5:22-23

I recently read a Gettysburg Times letter to the editor by Leon Reed responding to an earlier article that decried the decline of Christianity in this country and the subsequent moral decline of society. Reed took exception to the article's premise, asking, is there any "proof that there's a linkage between being a Christian and being good?" He argued that there is no connection between being a Christian and being good, and cited several historical examples of Christians doing bad. Ouch! Now I would argue that there is a connection, noting Christian leadership in creating hospitals worldwide, opposing slavery, promoting human rights of all kinds, including civil rights in our country, ending child labor, etc.

But the question Leon Reed raises is a good one, as many Christians don't seem to live lives that are morally better than those who don't follow Jesus. And that brings us to this preaching series on Christian virtues this summer. Christians have always believed that good character is important, because it reflects God's image in us. But character doesn't just magically appear in our lives. It needs to be carefully tended over a lifetime. Dan Coates, Dir. of National Intelligence, once said, "Character cannot be summoned at the moment of crisis if it has been squandered by years of compromise and rationalization. The only testing for the heroic is the mundane. The only preparation for that one profound decision which can

change a life, or even a nation, is those hundreds of half-conscious, self-defining, seemingly insignificant decisions made in private. Habit is the daily battleground of character.”

This series of sermons seeks to focus our attention on those elements of character, those virtues, to which Christians ought to aspire. Here’s a list of such virtues from Paul’s letter to the Colossian church.

¹²As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Col. 3:12-14)

Last week Lou talked about kindness, one of the virtues that Paul lists here. Today we focus on another one- patience. We’ll talk a little bit about what patience is, and then look at some ideas of how we might develop it.

When I perform weddings, couples frequently choose I Cor. 13 to be read. It is Paul’s wonderful essay on love. In part it reads,

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;⁶it does

not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

Did you notice the first thing Paul says about love? It is patient! When I am impatient, what I'm really saying is that my time, my ideas, my desires are more important than yours, and I'm frustrated and angry that I have to wait for you! That is not love! But patience acknowledges that your pace, ideas, and desires are just as important as mine, so I'll patiently wait. That's a mark of real love, according to Paul!

How are you doing with that kind of patience? A recent "Pearls Before Swine" comic strip may help. It begins with Pig talking to Rat.

Pig says: This magazine has a great personality test you should take. The first question is whether you would describe yourself as patient or impatient?

Rat: Patient.

Rat: What's the next question?

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Pig: (Looking at the personality test) Are you an honest assessor of yourself?

Rat: Definitely!

When I prepared this sermon, my initial self-assessment was that I am a fairly patient person. For example, I've learned that church decisions can take years to come to fruition, as can school board and borough approvals of parking lots! I can usually be patient with these things, as well as with underperforming staff or volunteers, etc. But then I started noticing (with help from my wife) that I'm not very patient when I'm driving. Just this week, I got stuck in construction traffic when I needed to get to a meeting, and then I got stuck behind a driver, whose driving can be described as "distracted" at best, making me still later. I confess that I was not patient in this situation!

The beginning of becoming more patient is to honestly assess our patience quotient right now. How patient are you, when your children are dawdling when you're in a hurry? When your spouse says, "Just a minute," for the fifth time!? When you experience delays at work? How about when the internet goes down or your phone dies? Where does your patience get tested? Sometimes simple awareness of the issue can help us address it; Sometimes we need the help of others.

So far I've been talking about patience with the daily trials of life. However, there is another kind of patience that often spans years of time—patience with God. I think of couples struggling with infertility, individuals

with long-term illnesses or addictions, or people who long to find a mate, but can't. These situations require an enduring kind of patience. Several biblical figures demonstrated that kind of patience in waiting for a long time. God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be the father and mother of many nations, but they couldn't produce a single child as they waited decades for God to fulfill his promise. David was anointed as king of Israel, but then spent the next several years on the run, living in caves and holes in the ground as Saul chased after him, hoping to kill him. And, you've probably heard the phrase, "He or she has the patience of Job." Job is proverbial for his patience, as loss after loss and hardship after hardship and illness after illness afflicted him. It got so bad that his wife begged him to "curse God and die." But Job continued to patiently believe in the goodness and trustworthiness of God, saying things like, "*Though he slay me, still I will trust him.*" (Job 13:15)

I think Job expresses the key to long-term patience- trust in the goodness and providence of God. If we can emotionally grab hold of the fact that God is good and in control of our lives, we can begin to let go of the things that cause us to be impatient. It gives us a different perspective. And during times of waiting, we look for reassurance that God still loves us and is for us. Worship can give us such reminders, as can daily quiet times with God. Other Christians can support us and encourage us during these

times of waiting, as we learn patience and how to trust in the ways and timing of God, just like those biblical characters did.

Back in that letter from Paul to the Colossian Christians, he calls us to “cloth ourselves” with virtues like patience. Although the Spirit of God, who came to live in the church at Pentecost, wants to give these virtues to us, we have a role to play, too. We begin by an honest self-assessment, calling our impatience for what it is- sin- falling short of what God intends for us. As we continue to develop our faith in a trustworthy God, we ask God’s help to learn patience. And we ask others to help us by praying for us and holding us accountable if need be.

One final thought on this Father’s Day. Parents have a role in teaching virtues like patience to their children. We teach them by our example, and by responding to our children’s actions by helping them label their responses as patient or impatient. We also make sure they are exposed to biblical teaching on Christian virtues here in church.

David Kraft grew up in San Francisco. His father was a godly man who constantly encouraged David to trust in God’s faithfulness. David grew to love Jesus and eventually felt a call to pastoral ministry, going to seminary in Denver. David was a big, athletic man, standing at 6’ 2” and weighing 200 pounds. A good athlete, David worked with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

At the age of 32, tragedy struck. David was afflicted with an aggressive form of cancer. It wracked his body until his weight dropped to only 80 pounds. Near the end of his life on this earth, his father was with him in his hospital room, holding him close. As they said goodbye to one another, David said, "Dad, thank you for building the kind of character into my life that can enable me to face even a moment like this."

Dads (and moms), you don't know what challenges- physical, emotional, relational, or moral- that your children will face in this life. Are you making sure that they are developing the Christian character to deal with whatever they may face? I hope so. Think about it. Pray about it.