

Opening Words

Don't you wish there was a patience pill? But there isn't, and God wants to build patience in our lives. How does he do that? That's what we will talk about today.

51 Ephesians Patience, Tolerance, Diligence in Unity

Hello everyone! Today we resume and finish our exploration of the first part of Paul's exhortation to oneness. I hope you are taking these messages to heart and asking God to help you apply these verses. They will fill you with joy and make a difference in your family, in your church, and in your relationships with those who do not know Christ.

In Ephesians 4, Paul spends sixteen verses making an appeal for oneness and the first part of that appeal is to remind us of the character qualities of Christ that the Holy Spirit wants to build into our lives. In our previous broadcast, we looked at humility and gentleness. Today we look at patience, forbearance in love, and diligence to pursue peace.

Paul says to walk worthy of our calling and another way to do this is to demonstrate patience. The word literally means "long tempered" and of course is the opposite of someone who is short tempered. I think we all know people who have been short tempered. They fly off the handle at the slightest provocation. It's not comfortable to be around them. Some of these people, frankly, are not comfortable with themselves and want help to overcome their outbursts of anger. They need to develop patience. But that is not an easy thing to develop because patience is like a muscle that must be exercised. If you want your muscles to be toned up or to get bigger, you must lift weights, and when you lift weights you are meeting resistance.

I hope you know what I am saying, the only way to develop patience is to be placed in situations which stretch you, to be put into situations that don't feel good. One man defined patience as the ability to endure discomfort without fighting back.

Here's what James 1:3 says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." Paul said the same in Romans 5:3, "we exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance." You can see the synonyms for patience here – endurance and perseverance. And you can also see how God builds these into our lives, trials, testings, and tribulations.

Don't you wish there was a patience pill? But there isn't, and God wants to build patience in our lives because if we are not patient with people we offend them and we cut off opportunity to minister. Think of how patient the Lord has been with us. Recently, I went through a trying circumstance. It was a circumstance that lasted for months and as the trial reached its climax, I was led by the Lord to review my life and to reconsider all the ways that I have exhibited behavior that was not worthy of our calling. I didn't do this with a spirit of condemnation or guilt. There is no condemnation for those in Christ. But I did this as an exercise to remember how merciful and how patient God has been with me. If God has been patient with me, then I can be patient with others. I

can learn to endure their weaknesses, their frailties, even their sins against me because I too am a weak, frail person who still is susceptible to sin. I rejoice in God's patience with me. I ask him to build patience in me that I might commend the grace of the Savior to others.

Paul moves from patience to tolerance. I believe this is like patience. If we are patient with people we will tolerate them. I looked up the word to refresh my thinking on it and found two definitions:
1) to allow the existence, presence, practice, or act of something without prohibition or hindrance.
2) to endure without repugnance; put up with.

That's another tall order isn't because sometimes people can be annoying. But imagine if every time someone exhibited annoying behavior we came down hard on them. You know what would happen. There would be yelling and arguing and screaming most of the time and some of it would be directed towards us because we have some annoying behavior as well.

Paul says, "don't be quick to judge or come down hard on people". Tolerate them, and please notice that he says to do this with love. Don't tolerate and then talk behind their backs. Don't tolerate and roll your eyes. Don't tolerate and sigh loudly. Don't tolerate and judge them. What does Paul say, "show tolerance for one another in love." Love them.

Keep in mind Paul is not talking about sin issues. He is not talking about people offending you or sinning against you or hurting you. He is talking about behavior, or tastes, or preferences that don't match your behavior, your tastes, or your preferences. And yours may be better or more refined or more mature than theirs. But if you are more refined and more mature, show your refinement and maturity by tolerating with love those who are different from you. This builds bridges with people. This deepens relationships. This shows others that you truly love them. And this opens doors of ministry when people see that you accept them where they are.

Most likely these people have an idea that their behavior is far from ideal, and they don't know how to go from where they are to where they need to be. But if they can find a loving, caring, accepting person they will eventually listen and take steps in the direction of greater maturity. What's the result? Greater unity, and that is the theme Paul is addressing in these verses.

Finally, Paul tells us in verse 4:3, one of my favorite verses, "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." I love this verse because it shows me that the Holy Spirit is always working to preserve unity in the body of Christ. Isn't that good and convicting! It is good because it tells us that our God is a God of peace and harmony. He wants us to live in peace with one another. It is also convicting because while the Spirit is working to preserve unity 100% of the time, we are not. But we can grow and become more like him and be a preserver of unity.

I like the verse also because it tells us that unity is not something that just automatically happens all the time. Yes, we can have amazing experiences in our church – experiences of worship where hands are lifted and everyone is in harmony worshipping God, we can have experiences of confession where we humble ourselves before one another and pray for one another. We can break bread together where we realize we are all needy people at the foot of the cross. These are wonderful, uniting experiences.

But we are not yet in eternity! We are not yet in our resurrection bodies. We are not yet living in the New Jerusalem. The heavens and the earth have not yet been remade. And when we leave those mountaintop spiritual experiences we go back to our homes and to our jobs and we get tired and hungry and cranky. We start forming opinions about Bible verses or church practices or family issues that others may not agree with. And then we get together with people who have different opinions and their behavior may be annoying, and we may be tempted to lose patience, and we don't want to be gentle with them. We don't want to show power under control but we just want to show power and dominate others and get things done. We are not walking in humility, and we lose the unity that the Holy Spirit is diligently working to maintain.

Paul is telling us in this great verse that God wants us to work with the Spirit in this matter. He wants us to walk in the Spirit and to be a unity-creator and maintainer. But this requires effort. This requires diligence. Every relationship requires this. Husbands and wives, parents and children, workers and managers. It takes diligence to work through issues.

In the church that I most recently pastored, we would always say this to new people who were seeking to join us that for a while the church would seem too good to be true. This was a honeymoon period where they loved the church, they loved the music, they loved the sermons, they loved the people, and so on. But we told them, "just wait." Eventually someone will offend you. Someone will rub you the wrong way, step on your toes, say something that is insensitive and you will want to leave the church. We exhorted them not to leave but to work through, biblically, what was troubling them and that if they stayed, if they persevered, if they were diligent to preserve the unity that the Spirit was working to create and maintain, they would deepen their relationship with Christ, with others, and would be a great testimony for the Lord.

I mentioned to you the trial that I have recently gone through. As I got before God, became quiet, prayed, thought on my life, freshly experienced his mercy and forgiveness and love to me despite all my insufficiencies and areas of immature character, I prayed for a renewed commitment to protect the Church, the Body of Christ.

I thought on the great verses in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 where Paul said: "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are." In these verses Paul calls the Church the Temple of God and says that God's Spirit dwells among us. I thought on the warning that if we destroy the unity of the Church, God will destroy us. Those are strong words. I don't believe they are talking about our eternal destiny, but they are talking about what we experience in this life. If we are a relationship destroyer or a church destroyer, we will reap the consequences and will see discipline and destruction in our lives. It could be financial destruction, relationship destruction, health destruction. We will reap what we sow and we will stand before God one day with shame because we did not treat the Church as holy.

As I meditated on those things, I prayed. I asked God to help me be a man who does not cause any rupture in the Body of Christ. I asked him to make me a man who brings grace and healing and unity to the Body of Christ. God has called us to be one people. In chapter 2 we saw how he reconciled Jew and Gentile into one body. Those who formerly had enmity to one another now were

one in Christ. The great work of God in Christ was to create a new community of oneness. The world has division. The world has chaos, racism, hatred, bigotry, prejudice, and war. The church is to be a model of what God intended the world to be and what it will one day be when Jesus returns.

Paul tells us, walk worthy of this hope. Walk worthy of this calling. Be humble, be gentle, be patient, show toleration with love, be diligent to preserve the unity that the Spirit creates. Be bound together in peace.