

The Glory of Christ in the Unity of His Church (Eph 4:2-3)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on January 8, 2012

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Ephesians 3:20 *Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us,*²¹ *to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. 4:1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,*² *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,*³ *being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

We studied the first 2 steps of the worthy walk in v. 2 last time.

Step 1: Lowliness

Step 2: Meekness

Step 3: Patience

Step 4: Forbearance

Purpose: Diligence to Preserve Unity (v. 3)

We need **PATIENCE** IN DIFFICULT SUFFERING

We need **FORBEARANCE** IN LOVING DIFFICULT SINNERS and

We need **DILIGENCE** FOR UNITY WITH DIFFICULT SAINTS

Picture a band of soldiers walking together, in step with each other. We are in warfare spiritually (as Paul will explain more in chapter 6) but our battle is not with flesh and blood and shouldn't be with the soldiers in the same troop with us, shooting our own, 'friendly fire' ... the battle is spiritual and it is internal, fought on the battle-ground of your own heart and mind. This is about declaring war in v. 2 on *your personal* pride/self-centeredness, your *own* harshness, *your sin* of impatience, *your tendency* to intolerance of others, and *your failure* to pursue and preserve spiritual unity and peace (v. 3).

The marching orders for the Lord's army, the cadence that keeps the peace/unity is: lowliness, meekness, patience, forbearance, and diligence for unity under our Captain, step-by-step, left-right-left... and our ultimate motivation is the glory of our Commander Christ.

The hymn says: Like a mighty army moves the Church of God
 Brothers we are treading where the saints have trod
 We are not divided, all one body we
 One in hope and doctrine, one in charity
 Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war
 With the cross of Jesus going on before

Let's look at v. 2-3, keeping Christ, His cross, His glory before us:

First, We Need PATIENCE in Difficult Suffering

In particular, patience for suffering inflicted on us by other people.

The ancient Greek culture that received the New Testament was not known for its patience.

Aristotle said that the greatest Greek virtue was basically the opposite of this trait.

They saw strength as refusal to tolerate any insult and readiness to strike back. But biblical patience tolerates much *without* retaliation. And the difficulties the NT readers suffered were often worse than ours.

Maybe you are impatient when you drive anytime there are slow people in front of you even for a moment. You huff and puff and “suffer” if you go a little below the speed limit since you deserve the right to drive down the road and never have to slow down and everyone else on the road should be clearing the way? Amen?

- We are impatient to stand in lines for the bathroom?
- or for people in front of you at post office or store when you just want to buy a few things and they have a lot of items and it’s complicated and other lines are going faster?
- or slow service in a bank or restaurant, drive thru, computer speeds, Internet speeds, traffic on freeway – some of you this week were impatient with people on the road, maybe even today, because others in front weren’t so fast and you were in a hurry to get to church? (no show of hands, please)

It’s been said “Better to be patient on the road than a patient in the hospital.” Actually the origin of the English word patient is from the Latin *patientia*, from patient-, *pati* ‘suffer’. So the English word came to refer both to those who *suffer in health* and need to be in the hospital and those who are *long-suffering* or patient in spirit. In some of your translations of v. 2 the word here is “longsuffering.” It’s the idea of patiently, graciously enduring *suffering a long time*.

James 5:10 puts the ideas together this way: *As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.*

One example would be the prophet Jeremiah, hated, maligned, and ignored (Jer. 1:5-19) but he faithfully patiently endured suffering (we could add Isaiah, Ezekiel, Elijah, and others to the list). The word patience is defined by Harold Hoehner: ‘cautious endurance that does not abandon hope. It pertains to waiting patiently without immediate results, like ... prophets who waited for God’s action.’¹

The root idea is a big or long fuse, in contrast to one who quickly or easily goes off or explodes in anger: *macro*=big/long, *thumia*= Greek root word for anger. Literally it means “*slow to anger*” and the Hebrew equivalent of that phrase was used many times in OT.

James 5 tells us to understand patience, we not only should recall OT prophets, he calls us to reflect on God’s patience in the OT:

¹¹ *We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the [‘patience’ KJV] of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that **the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.***

That phrase that describes the Lord as “full of compassion and mercy/is merciful” would have reminded the original NT Jewish readers about one of the most repeated descriptions of God and His glory in their own Hebrew Scriptures in many familiar passages:

- Moses says to God in Exodus 33:18 “*show me your glory.*” And this is how God does it, this is how He proclaims His very name as His glory passes by: ‘*The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy...*’ (Ex 34:6)

- Ps 103:8 *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, **Slow to anger** and abounding in mercy [or loving-kindness/steadfast love, Hebrew *hesed*, often joined with this attribute]*
- When Moses later prays to this Lord and pleads for mercy, this is what he appeals to: “*The LORD is **slow to anger** and abundant in mercy ... Pardon, I pray the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your mercy ...*” (Numbers 14:18-19)
- When Nahum speaks of God’s just wrath aimed against His people, Israel’s hope is this: “*The Lord is slow to anger*” (Nah 1:3)
- Nehemiah also knew that it is only because of the patience of God that we have not been and are not wiped out entirely, and that had a profound impact on how he lived and prayed in light of grace for Israel who “*refused to listen, And did not remember Your wondrous deeds ... they became stubborn ... But You are a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, **Slow to anger** and abounding in mercy; And You did not forsake them.*” (Neh 9:17)
- Ps 86:15 *You O Lord are...**slow to anger** and abundant in mercy*
- Ps 145:8 *The LORD is gracious and full of compassion; **Slow to anger** and great in mercy* [ESV “abounding in steadfast love”]
- Joel 2:13 *Now return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, **slow to anger**, abounding in mercy ...*
- Jonah 4:2 *I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, **slow to anger** and abundant in mercy ...*
- James 5:11 similarly speaks of patience we’re to have like Job, and he adds “***the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.***”

This is how the people of God prayed (Moses, Nahum, Nehemiah, David, Joel, Jonah, James, etc.) this was the very character and revelation of who their covenant LORD was and is, His essence and His glory: *graciousness, compassion, slow to anger, merciful.*

Those are the words that go together with patience/long-suffering. In 1 Cor. 13, the great love chapter, describing God’s agape love, the love God has that we’re to have, the first description of love in v. 4 is: “*Love is **patient**...*” (or in KJV “*charity **suffereth long**...*”). This is not something we produce on our own. Galatians 5:22: “*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, **patience**...*”

We need to understand longsuffering/patience/being slow to anger in this context. Eph 3:20 talks about the power of God that is at work in us, then v. 21 says “*to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus...*” 4:1 “*...walk worthy...*” 4:2 “*...with patience...*”

Turn forward a few pages to Colossians 1, where Paul, the same writer uses the same words, to highlight how God’s power and man’s patience relates to the glory of the Lord in our worthy walk: Col. 1:10 *that you will **walk** in a manner **worthy** of the Lord ...¹¹ strengthened with all power, **according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience...***

Other versions have endurance or longsuffering, but the important thing for us to see: patience relates to the glory of the Lord, and it requires His strength and power as we seek to walk worthy of Him. Jesus endured the cross and we must fix our eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:2) as we’re *marching as to war with the cross of Jesus before us*

We need to consider Him who endured so patiently in difficulty as He was here on earth, our suffering Savior who loved so patiently. We need to consider the same Lord, patiently waiting in the days of Noah, giving over 100 years for them to repent (1 Peter 3:20). In Romans 9, Paul says God “**endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy...**” (v. 22-23, that’s us!).

1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV) *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.* ¹⁶ *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his ... patience as an example for those who would believe on him* ¹⁷ *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

God is glorified in His patience to chiefs of sinners like us. This is the motive we need to keep before us (God’s glory) and the means for our patience (the Lord’s example and Lord’s empowering). The musician Shai Linne in his Attributes of God album says it like this

Lord, you're holy, we shouldn't even be in Your presence
 Due to our sin, we don't deserve the least of Your blessings
 But through the cross and believing that Jesus is risen
 Even the worst of sinners can be redeemed and forgiven
 I'm living proof when I say this and these are truthful statements
 You're beautiful when displaying Your unusual patience
 You take the blasphemous; pridefully stuck in our blindness
 Instead of smashing us, decided to love us with kindness
 Even with unbelievers facing Your terror, You slow up
 Like when You waited patiently in the era of Noah ...

... we were unbelievers committing tons of treason
 We had a hundred reasons why we wouldn't come to Jesus
 But they were all excuses because our thoughts were useless
 That's what the dark produces, Father, You already knew this
 We were foolish and clueless, just as ruthless as Judas
 Who knew that You would choose to pursue us and move to woo us
 So after waiting with patience as we would run from You
 You activated our faith so that we would come to You
 Your law exposed our sin so that we would know the danger
 And take refuge in the Holy Savior who's slow to anger
 And as our teary eyes beheld the cross of our King
 We understood the true meaning of long-suffering ...

And now that we're in Christ, the thing that is amazing to us
 Is that You still continue to display Your patience to us
 Through all our stumbles and falls and our idolatry
 Through all our grumbling and all of our hypocrisy
 Our self-righteousness, with brothers and sisters we're hostile
 Our unforgiveness; all because we're ... missing the gospel
 We should be slow to anger, but Your Word—we're slow to hear it
 Oh Father, help us please! We truly need Your Holy Spirit!
 ...Who can record Your graces? Adored through scores of ages
 Your reward is the nations, for You are the Lord of patience ...²

Which leads us to our 2nd point that's closely related to the first ... not only do we need patience in enduring difficult suffering, also: **We Need Forbearance in Loving Difficult Sinners**

The next word in Eph 4:2 is *forbearance/bearing with one another*. Proverbs 19:11 combines the ideas this way: *A man's wisdom gives him **patience**; it is to his **glory to overlook an offense*** (NIV). This Greek word has to do with holding self in check to bear with other people's offenses or offensiveness, faults, failures, or even their personalities, and things about them that just irritate and bug you!

We have some in our household that make this a real challenge at times – with each other and even with mom and dad. I struggled with patience and forbearance growing up with my brother and my sisters ... a family member can sometimes make you question the promise 'God won't give you more than you can bear'! And as an adult, I still have a long way to go with my own children at times, and my impatience and irritability says more about me than them. But I'm so thankful my Father in heaven patiently bears with me.

And the same challenges we have in human families can spill over into church families. God puts us very different people together in families on purpose (physical or spiritual families), so that we'll grow in this area. Almost all of us have something or someone in this room really bothers you. I'm not talking about clear black and white sin issues, there is a Scriptural place to in love address those with the other person...I'm talking about differences, annoyances, that make *others* hard to be with and that make *us* hard to be with!

The NASB translates it "showing tolerance." In other places, it's translated "put up with." Maybe some of you last couple weekends 'put up with' in-laws for the holidays ... but it's important to see the phrase that Paul qualifies this with: "...*in love*." It's not putting up with someone you hate or can't stand, it's forbearance *in love*. NLT: "*making allowance for each other's faults because of love*"

If Paul didn't end this verse with this word love, we might think of "bearing our cross" trying not to outwardly sin, but still have inner anger or resentment. Instead of "grin and bear it," we "sin and bear it." It's not ok to bear with them while acting like a bear to them!

Our God calls us to bear with one another *in love*. This *agape* love again is from 1 Cor. 13, love is: *patient, kind, not easily angered or self-seeking and not taking into account a wrong suffered, love that bears all things and endures all things. Love covers a multitude of sins*. Biblical love is an unconditional, others-centered, giving of self that isn't dependent on feelings, or the response of the person.

Galatians 6 adds a qualification and clarification of bearing in love, that bearing with them personally, not taking personally their sins, doesn't mean we never address/confront serious sin against God. That's part of "in love": Gal 6:1 ...*if anyone is caught [ensnared / overtaken] in any trespass, you who are spiritual, **restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness**; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.* ² ***Bear one another's burdens*** ...

Matthew 18:15-17 develops that process further, but the heart is:

Colossians 3:12 “So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a **heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience;** ¹³ **bearing with one another and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone;** just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. ¹⁴ **Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”**

How does that work in v. 13? “*bearing with one another and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone*”! In Mark 11 Jesus develops this a little further. If we have a complaint against someone, maybe you say “well, I’m not bitter, I’m just bothered by them” ... whatever you want to call it, if you have something against someone, here’s what Jesus says:

Mark 11:25 (NKJV) “*And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him...*” (but wait, you say, that other person isn’t there asking forgiveness, this is just you praying to God, and you realize you have something against another, you mean I’m supposed to forgive him in my heart right then? Yes!)

Now there’s another level of forgiveness, restoration/reconciliation (Luke 17, a 2-way *transaction of forgiveness* that is the ideal hope, and that involves repentance, reciprocal relational forgiveness that you grant), but if you have something against anyone, Jesus says whenever you’re praying ... you forgive that person in your heart. You can’t always repair human relationships, but your relationship with God will be impaired if you don’t or won’t forgive like this.

See, this is related to the rightness of your relationship with your heavenly Father, the end of the verse says and next verse says. If you are not forgiving in your heart as you pray, your heart is not right with God, and you need that relationship restored. Repent and ask God to forgive you for your unforgiving heart and to change it. And praise Him for bearing patiently with you when you haven’t with people who sin against you far less than you sin against God!

Now turn back to Matthew 5. What if we’ve been hard to bear? If *we have something against someone*, as we pray, we must forbear and forgive and give that over to God (in a few minutes we’ll have opportunity to apply that in prayer in our hearts as we come to The Lord’s Table/communion). But what do we do there if we know someone has something against us, if there’s a breach in our relationship as a result, because of *something someone has against you* (whether you meant it or not, maybe it’s a misunderstanding):

5:23 *Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; **first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.***

Notice carefully the context is worship, and a fellow worshipper close enough for you to go to, one who is also a believer (“*your brother*”) and this person has something against you, something you think about when you come to worship, what do you do? The Lord commands you today “*go, first be reconciled ... then come.*”

Today we give our offerings/gifts financially in the offering box in the back. There is no altar sacrifice in our worship but in Communion we remember Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice.

What should we do if it's Communion Sunday (like today) or any week where you are ready to bring your gifts for offering to the back of church, and you remember a brother or sister in Christ here has something against you? Should you hold off on partaking the bread and cup, symbols of Christ's sacrifice and reconciliation in Communion, until you've gone to your brother or sister to seek to reconcile? Should you *not* give to the church your offering today?

Jesus said it, not me: *Go...then come*. Go today, if you can, seek to reconcile with that person, then come back and give your offering after you've at least done what you can. Now, that may not be the recommended thing to say when you're trying to raise money for a new building fund ... but Jesus cares more for the building up of the unity of His church. Jesus is more concerned about unity than He is us doing outward worship. Better to let the plate pass during Communion today and spend that whole time in prayer to help you obey for the sake of what the bread symbolizes: the body of Christ.

Romans 12:18 says "*If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.*"

Similar language to Eph. 4:3 in NIV: "*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*" Go in the Ephesians 4:2 spirit of humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with the other person in love (don't retaliate verbally if the other person responds not so humbly or gently, be longsuffering), forbearing, doing all you can to preserve unity.

May God help us to apply this message as we come now to our time of Communion.

Let's pray.

¹ Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 509.

² Shai Linne, "The Lord of Patience," Attributes of God album (2011).