

1 Corinthians 13 (4-7) pt.2 – Love is Longsuffering

What do you think of when you hear that word patience? Most people think about putting up with delays or problems without getting annoyed. But the word longsuffering more fully captures the idea that the Bible is trying to convey here. Longsuffering means patiently enduring offense or hardship. And this is not primarily about circumstances or events, but about people. It is suffering long for the sake of love. And it might help you to see the word “love” here as “charity”. Love means having a charitable disposition. And that means a whole lot more than just being nice or playing well with others. It is the ability to be wronged, and while having the power to retaliate, doesn’t do it. Patience is part of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, revealing the close connection between love and longsuffering, and the Spirit’s presence in your life.

Yes, there are times when you should defend yourself from someone who aims to harm you. But even in those times, you aren’t seeking revenge, you are exercising self-defense. And even then, it is for the purpose of peace. Think of a toddler who tries to bite you very hard in a way that might do real damage. You wouldn’t attack the child, you’d simply move them using as little force as necessary. Of course, it’s easy to love those who treat you well, and forgive others who don’t really know any better. And it’s hard to love those who disappoint you over and over. But you never have an excuse to unload the cannons on someone just because they make your life less convenient.

Colossians 3:12-13 says, “*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*” This makes sense when you look at patience as longsuffering instead of just not getting annoyed with someone. You may think it’s hard not getting annoyed over delays or problems. But when you understand patience as longsuffering with people then it might seem almost impossible. But do you think the injuries you have received from others are worse than your sins before and against God? Indeed, *as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

So, when you find it hard to be longsuffering in love for others, remember Christ and his longsuffering love toward you. Ask yourself, how can I show others the same love that Christ has shown me? Is it through the short fuse of social media? Or by talking past each other? Is it by having conversations that are caustic and anything but charitable? Is it by being conditioned for conflict? By giving ultimatums, or exercising your “nuclear option”? No, indeed, it is not.

Think of the character of God, and how patient he is with you, waiting patiently for you to confess your sins, always waiting to give you a chance to repent. 1 Timothy 1:15-16 says, “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.*” 1 John 4:8 says that God is love, and the Scriptures abound with the truth that God is patient (cf. Exodus 34:6 / Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8 / Romans 2:4 / 1 Peter 3:20 / 2 Peter 3:9).

Ephesians 4:1-2 says that a worthy walk with the Lord includes patience, and patience is described as *bearing with one another in love*. 2 Corinthians 6:6, 2 Timothy 2:24, and 2 Timothy 4:2 say that patience is an indispensable part of preaching, teaching, and good ministry.

Longsuffering love will work to prevent evil and end injustice to others while enduring injustice against itself. Love knows that the God of righteous judgment will punish evil, and eliminate injustice for eternity as his righteousness prevails. He will make all the wrongs right. But you see and feel impatience when other people fail to meet your agenda. Instead of waiting for God to work, you try to play God for other people and underneath that impatience is your impatience with God. Your inner narrative is something like, “Why doesn’t God hurry up and make everything right with this world?” But as you really surrender your home life, work life, church life, and social life to the lordship of Jesus Christ, then you are able to wait patiently for him to work things out.

Are you acting like a Christian? For many, acting like a Christian means standing for the truth. And yes, that’s part of it, but how you stand for truth is a big part of that. Standing steadfast for truth is a good thing, and a zeal for good morals is not automatically prideful. But knowledge and morality are not what get you to heaven. The dividing line between the church and the world is not knowledge or morality, it is Christ. But even with Christians you can have an entitlement mindset that thinks you deserve more latitude than others. You think, I know more things rightly than you do, I act more rightly than you do, so I am more important than you are. And this pride leads to impatience, a lack of longsuffering. A lack of Christlikeness, even in the name of Christ.

This kind of hypocrisy is rampant on social media. People assume that they trust the gospel but fail to realize the implications of the gospel. You can be so interested in fighting for what’s right that you focus like a laser on the speck in someone else’s eye while you miss the log in your own. Love isn’t interested in making points or winning debates or scoring zingers. Love plays the long game. And that doesn’t mean planning revenge, it means planning reconciliation and fellowship. Sometimes people will get deeply offended with you, and they won’t be longsuffering with you. It is then that you must be longsuffering with them. They may shout you down or shut you off. But remember that no one can hurt your feelings unless you give them permission.

You neglect longsuffering to the peril of your peace, your relationships, and your witness. Failure to grow in this area leads to a hard heart. If you don’t learn to love in a longsuffering way you won’t be able to handle any perceived harm that comes your way. And it won’t stop coming. Your imagination will run away with you. You won’t be able to process pain or problems. You’ll overreact, and escalate every situation into a crisis. And you’ll avoid, disconnect, and isolate yourself from certain people, and from certain sanctification. You may move on to greener pastures only to pollute the soil with your poisoned soul. It’s not that you woke up one day and decided to be mad at the world. Or someone in your world. It’s that you ignored all the God given opportunities to grow in this area and so you will fail to be like Jesus when a particular instance enflames your undealt with issue. It’s a destructive cycle. But God can help you stop it.

You might think of growth in the Christian life in terms of larger platforms and doing things and staying busy for God. But one of the truly great changes that proves God is working in your life is something that might not seem obvious. However, it is such a big change that if it were happening on a larger scale the church would be radically revolutionized. This isn’t something you do, it is something that is different about you. 1 Timothy 1:5 says that the aim of Christianity is love. And that includes a charitable disposition which is patient in your relationships. Love is longsuffering. This is the answer to the ongoing universal problem of taking offense. Proof that it isn’t happening with most people is that offense continues to happen in churches at such a regular rate.

The opposite of love is hatred. And the opposite of longsuffering, impatience, is at its core, a manifestation of hatred. Proverbs 10:12 says, “*Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.*” Instead of longsuffering love, impatient hatred keeps bitterness alive. It stokes the flames of unforgiveness. It finds fault in others’ weaknesses, and it makes mountains out of molehills. It has a sight for personal slight – it wants to be mad. Longsuffering love wants to see others in the best possible light. Impatient hatred wants to see others in the worst possible light. Longsuffering love wants to encourage people. Impatient hatred wants to expose people.

Let me describe longsuffering even further. If your child were expressing themselves in a limited, undeveloped unsophisticated way, you’d still listen. Why? Because you love them, and so you would be looking for signs of learning, of growth, of understanding. You’d want to make sure you fully comprehended what they were saying. When your child first starts to form words, and even well before then, you don’t think they have nothing to say, you strain to hear and stretch what you hear to make any sort of connection with real words. You look to be edified and to rejoice with the blabbering baby. They said mommy or daddy and no one can tell you different. And every little move in the right direction is celebrated and cultivated in your heart. You are as patient as a parent ought to be. You aren’t annoyed. You’re amazed. That’s love.

Now with adults you don’t even think that way at all. You reason that well, they ought to know better. Maybe so, but this is why it is longsuffering. And you still ought to be looking for the good, instead of immediately pouncing on the bad. But prideful impatience won’t even consider the other side. You are looking to demonize others rather than discern your own heart.

This may seem counterintuitive to you, but the truth is that the more spiritually mature you become, the more easily edified you are. A spiritually mature person can see and enjoy the good more easily and that is charity at work in their heart. This doesn’t mean a lack of discernment, but a charitable attitude. A person who is impatient sees the bad immediately, looks for the bad exclusively, and imagines the bad catastrophically. And you’ll see ghosts. Everyone disappoints you. Everyone is out to get you. Everyone else is the problem. They will not listen charitably, and they will not be edified easily. This is spiritual immaturity, and it is rampant in society. People want to beat you down instead of building you up. And by constantly looking to tear people down, it shows that they are torn up inside. Hurt people will hurt people.

So, if you are on the receiving end of such an assault, the Christian way is longsuffering. That takes real growth, but this is the proving ground. When someone lashes out at you, do you grab the lash, and twist it around their neck to choke them? Or do you take the stripes as a mark of maturity in Christ? By his stripes you have been healed, and by your stripes he is revealed.

The Holy Spirit can empower you to love like Jesus does. Remember, forgiveness is the basis of fruitfulness. Your understanding of your forgiveness from God causes you to act in love toward others. And so, the deeper your understanding of God’s love for you, the deeper your love for others will be. So, think about longsuffering love, and prayerfully do this. 1) Acknowledge the standard. Do you understand it? 2) Confess how you don’t meet the standard. Be specific. 3) Thank Jesus for meeting the standard for you. He lived for you and paid your sin debt. Praise his name. 4) Strive after the standard as an act of worship. Not as a *means* of being right with God, but as the *result* of being right with God. Then, be ready for the tests to come and the fruit to form.

Scripture reading: Psalm 32

Anger
Charity
Discretion
Forbearance
Forgiveness
Hatred
Impatience
Injustice
Offense
Patience
Perseverance
Relationships
Retaliation
Temper
Wisdom
Witness

Overview: Longsuffering love means having a charitable disposition. And that means a whole lot more than just being nice or playing well with others. It is the ability to be wronged, and while having the power to retaliate, doesn't do it.