

The Power of Patience

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Introduction.

Other than monthly refresher lessons throughout 2010, this is going to be the final lesson in our series on agape evangelism. We've looked at why we ought to save the lost, how important love is to the process, and how to teach others once we've gotten them to that point. This process is simple, and it produces results. I know because I've been doing it and I've gotten them. This is not because I'm some kind of super-Christian. It's because God's way works, and if we all dedicate ourselves to evangelism God's way, then God will grant us a truly massive harvest of souls.

Of course, the flip side of the coin is that if we don't do evangelism God's way, it won't work, and this is where the danger for us lies. If I fear anything in this evangelistic effort, I fear that we will short-circuit things by not being patient enough. It's easy to see why this would be a problem for us. We start off going gangbusters for the first two weeks of January. We do everything we can to show people we love them. Maybe we even mention Jesus to them. But then, despite all of our efforts, nothing happens. As a result, we lose interest in evangelism, go back to the way we were living our lives before, and because of this, the hundreds of thousands of people in this area stay lost.

That would represent a mighty victory for Satan, and we can't let it happen. We have to understand that evangelism God's way, evangelism based on love, isn't a sprint. It's a marathon. Even people who are going to obey the gospel may need months or even years of careful, loving work from us before they reach that point. When we leave that work half-finished, nothing good is going to come from it. Instead, we have to be disciplined about evangelism. We have to stay committed to love, regardless of the time frame, regardless of the apparent result. If we do this, if we continue to serve God as He has asked, He will crown our efforts with success. Let's see why as we look at the power of patience.

Why Is Patience Necessary?

As with anything else, before we start going to great lengths to understand and develop patience, we ought to figure out whether it's worthwhile in the first place. We ought to ask, "Why is patience necessary?" In the realm of evangelism, at least, the answer is twofold. First, we need patience when we attempt to reach the lost because it is inevitable that more people are going to refuse to listen than are going to hear us. Consider Jesus' sobering admonition in Matthew 7:13-14. From the very beginning of our faith, it has always been true that only a few are going to take the path that leads to life. This isn't quite as dispiriting as it sounds. After all, in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of Jews in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, the 3000 who obeyed were only a few. However, we will never win most people.

This is important not just on a macro, but on a micro level. It means that if we attempt to lead only one person to Christ, that one person is most likely not going to listen. Now, we can either be discouraged by that and assume that we're no good at evangelism, or we can understand the percentages at work and move on to somebody else. If we take the first approach, that's guaranteed to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, and we might have to answer some questions about it on the day of judgment. If we take the second approach, though, and persevere and refuse to quit, sooner or later we're going to run into somebody who's willing to give us a listen. That's what will lead others to obey the gospel.

Second, we need to be patient not just with the lost in general, but with the particular people we're working with. Look at Jesus' question to Saul, as he repeats it in Acts 26:14. For those of you who aren't too familiar with farming implements of the ancient world, a goad was a stick with a metal point on one end. When a farmer was plowing his field with a team of oxen, and one of the oxen decided he didn't want to keep plowing, the farmer would poke him with the goad until he started moving again. Of course, some oxen weren't too bright, and they tried to deal with the irritation of the goad by kicking back at it. That didn't deter the farmer, and it didn't stop the goad either. Jesus here is comparing Saul to an ox who's being dumb and stubborn. The gospel keeps poking at him, but he's foolishly ignoring it.

Of course, Saul did eventually obey the gospel. It just took a lot of poking from God before he did. Likewise, it's not uncommon for us to encounter people who know and understand the truth, but are just stubborn about obeying it for some reason. If God had given Saul only one poke, he'd probably have happily continued on as a persecutor of the church. If we give these people in our lives only one poke, they may well also stop short of obedience. That's where patience comes in handy. We always have to be gentle and loving, but we also have to hang in there and not let up.

Ways to Be Patient.

Because patience is so clearly important to our evangelistic success, we must look for ways to be patient. The first of these that we're presented with in Scripture is **DON'T BE PROUD**. Solomon advises us against this kind of pride in Ecclesiastes 7:8. I fear that many Christians destroy their chances of reaching out to others through their arrogance. If you've talked to many denominational folks in the South, you'll know that the churches of Christ have the

reputation of believing that everybody else is going to hell. We likely have that reputation because a whole bunch of Christians have spent decades repeating exactly that. That sure makes it sound like we believe we're better than everybody else, and it may well be that many Christians do believe they're better than everybody else. Regardless of what the Bible says, if we ride in on our high horses and start telling everybody off and expect them to kowtow to our superior knowledge, we're in for a disappointment. We need to work patiently with others, not blast them with our pride.

In a similar vein, even when others start disagreeing with us, even when they get downright disagreeable, we need to keep our tempers and **NOT BE ANGRY**. Look at the picture of the servant of God presented in 2 Timothy 2:24-26. As we've discussed in earlier lessons, we must resist the temptation to get into a religious argument with somebody, even when that's what they clearly want. No matter how ignorant some outsider may be, no matter how self-righteously he repeats the false doctrine he's been taught, we must never look to triumph over him. We must never sink to his level. Our goal must be to persuade, to gently, humbly point him to the Scriptures that show what the truth is. Then, we step out of the limelight and let God do the talking. Our evangelism must begin with love, but we can't just abandon it once we start talking about the Bible. Instead, our love must be revealed by the patient way we address disagreement.

If all of this is getting difficult, if our failure to find people to talk to or the people we **ARE** talking to are getting us down, that's when we need to **LOOK TO THE WORD**. It will help us to be patient. Consider the advice of Paul in Romans 15:2-4. Notice that what's under discussion here is not pleasing our brother, but pleasing our neighbor. This is not about dealing with other Christians, but about dealing with outsiders. In this, we can take encouragement from Jesus and the other heroes of Scripture. Jesus wasn't a quitter. He was so dedicated to sinners that He followed through to the end of God's plan. He overcame discouragement, opposition, and even the fear of death to become the sacrifice for our sins. We can point to other examples in the Bible of believers who were just as dedicated. Despite all the trials they faced, they succeeded in accomplishing the will of God, not through their own power and ability, but through God who gave them the strength to keep going. If God helped them be patient, He will help us be patient too.

Of course, the word is not the only thing that can teach us spiritual lessons. We can also **LEARN FROM THE CHALLENGES** we face to be more patient. James famously advises us to do this in James 1:2-4. Although this Scripture speaks generally, we can certainly apply it to evangelism. If we lived in a world where evangelism was easy, where all the fish just jumped into the boat, we wouldn't ever have to get very good at evangelism. If our perseverance is never tested, we will never develop more perseverance. However, when things get hard, that's when we learn and grow. We determine that we are going to stick to God's way despite the challenges we face, and then, as we hang in there punching, we get better. Any Christian can understand and apply the concepts needed to reach the lost, but just like anything else, evangelism is a skill. We master it through practice. We learn what we ought to say and do both from what works and what doesn't work. We learn how to understand people and reach them. I myself haven't been doing this very long, brethren, I'm not particularly naturally gifted at it, and I knew little to nothing about it before I got here. Nonetheless, in just the short span of time I've been working, with just the relatively small number of people I've studied with, I've learned a great deal. I've kept being patient, and that has made me a better evangelist.

It's just as important that we **DON'T BECOME WEARY**. Paul tells us why we shouldn't be in Galatians 6:7-9. In evangelism as in everything else, we will reap what we sow if we continue to work on it. In this area, we can gain encouragement from the parable of the soils. The seed sown on the roadside never produced anything. The seed sown on the stony ground came up and died. The seed sown among thorns never produced any fruit, but the seed sown on the good ground did. It's a near certainty that if we sow enough seed, we will find people who don't listen, people who obey then fall away, and people who obey and become unfruitful Christians. However, it is also a near certainty that we will find people who obey the gospel and become pillars of the church. It may be that it falls to us to convert future Bible-class teachers, future songleaders, future elders and elders' wives, and if we convert enough people, that too becomes a near certainty. God's word is not dead. It is living. It will reach the hearts that God wants it to reach. If we bring the word to enough hearts and continue on in our work for Him, we will surely see the harvest.

For that to happen, though, we have to learn the hardest lesson of patience, which is that we must **WAIT FOR GOD**. This does not come naturally to us, and to me in particular. I've been trained by too much academic work, I suppose, and I've got a nasty habit of trusting in myself and my abilities, rather than trusting in God. That's not what evangelism is all about. No matter what we do, we can never be more than assistants. We can plant and water, but it is always God who causes the growth. That's the idea encapsulated in Psalm 37:7. God does things in His own time and in His own way, and none of us are going to rush Him. As a result, sometimes evangelism is more about waiting than about working. Let me tell you, brethren: there are Christians sitting in this auditorium right now that I had given up on. I'd studied with them and thought about what to say and talked to other preachers and prayed for help, and still, after months of study in some cases, they weren't getting their lives right with God. I've been at my wit's end more than once. I've decided to do a study or two and then wash my hands of the matter. But despite my inadequacy, despite my despair, God was working in their hearts all along, and they made their lives right with Him. Sometimes, we just need to wait.