

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Learning to be like Christ: Learning Longsuffering

Good morning and welcome to “*Truth for Today*” where we have the second of four talks centred under the general heading ‘Learning to be like Christ’. Last week the particular virtue brought before our attention was humility; today it is longsuffering. Some might argue that it is impossible for us to be like the Lord Jesus, as His life was perfect and His obedience to God’s will was total. As an answer, I can do no better than quote the words of the Lord Himself, from Matthew 11:28-30: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

This quotation is from the Authorised Version of 1611. JN Darby’s translation makes verse 29 clearer still in its implication that we learn from the Lord Jesus, for he renders this passage as: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” I think, therefore, that this verse makes it incumbent upon every true Christian to follow in the footsteps of the Lord and, through the power of the Spirit, to be like Him.

In addition to longsuffering, I shall consider the Christian virtue of patience and, though the two are not synonymous, they are sufficiently similar to be studied together. At this point I would emphasise that my prayer is that these talks would be more than technical discussions of various biblical words. If we are not led to change our behaviour and attitude so that patience and longsuffering are manifested, rather than impatience, then we have not learned the truth. Those who know the truth with their minds, yet remain unchanged are bordering on hypocrisy, which is completely against Christian values.

To try to illustrate the difference between patience and long suffering I will quote a couple of sentences from WE Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*: “Longsuffering is that quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish; it is the opposite of anger, and associated with mercy, and is used of God (Romans 2:4). Patience is the quality that does not surrender to circumstances or succumb under trial; it is the opposite of despondency and is associated with hope (1 Thessalonians 1:3).”

I shall now read the biblical quotations that Vine used in the passage that we have just read.

The context of Romans 2 declares the whole world guilty before God and verses 3 and 4 state: “And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance.” Notice that the longsuffering of God emerges from His goodness, and not indifference or carelessness, for the aim of His longsuffering is the repentance of the sinner. It must be recognised that a holy God does not, nor ever can, approve of, or remain indifferent to, a man’s sinful behaviour.

The other passage quoted by Vine is 1 Thessalonians 1:3: “Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.” It is obvious, when we read this verse, that the Apostle Paul is writing about his converts in Thessalonica, and that, therefore, patience refers to the behaviour of the Christians at Thessalonica. Before I take up the subject of the Christian and patience, I want to return to the thought of longsuffering as we see it in the Old Testament.

The first mention we find in Scripture of ‘longsuffering’ is in Exodus 34:6, and I read, as usual, from the Authorised Version of 1611: “And the LORD passed by before [Moses], and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty: visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and fourth generation.” There are other verses that I could quote, but this indicates that which is true for them all, namely that longsuffering represents the restraint of God’s righteous anger in the face of sinful behaviour and transgression by His people. This passage also indicates that God’s longsuffering is not prolonged forever.

I want to reinforce this picture of the God revealed in the Old Testament, because many people seem to think that the God revealed there is a blood thirsty, tyrannical task master, as opposed to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus. I

now read from the Psalm 86:15-16: "But thou, O LORD, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth. O turn unto me, and have mercy upon me; give thy strength unto thy servant, and save the son of thine handmaid." Here, again, 'longsuffering' is linked with God's graciousness and His merciful character. Though, in a few minutes I want to show how 'longsuffering' was a part of the Apostle Paul's teaching, I trust that I have shown that it was first brought to light in the Old Testament as an important factor in God's dealings with His people.

When we turn to the New Testament a similar picture emerges, where longsuffering and patience are characteristics of God. I am led to believe that these words are relatively unknown in classical Greek and that, outside of the New Testament they were not considered virtues at all. 'Longsuffering', to the writers of the New Testament, meant a steadfast endurance that will never capitulate. We can read in Hebrews 6:13-15 about Abraham exhibiting this spirit: "For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee. And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise." From this passage we learn that 'patient endurance' is something that the writer counts as valuable and worth emulating in the life of a Christian. This virtue of 'patient endurance' or 'longsuffering' is necessary for the child of God as he, or she, waits for the Lord's appearing.

It is important for us to acknowledge that longsuffering and patience are necessary parts of the Christian's character at all times, and not only when provoked by persecution and opposition. James informs us James 5:7-8: "Be patient therefore, brethren unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh." Here, when the example of patience is the farmer, the lesson is for patience to be exercised in the common run of life.

On the other hand the same writer, in 5:10, says: "Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and patience." And so, whether undergoing persecution, or just undertaking the normal rhythms of life, we, as followers of the Lord Jesus, must exhibit patience and longsuffering, which can endure delay and never give in.

An additional note can be added here to indicate that this patience is not the inability to strike back if such revenge was desired. Lightfoot, the Victorian theologian, explained Christian longsuffering as 'the spirit that refuses to retaliate'. The Greeks thought the opposite for they vaunted the attitude that refused to meekly accept any insult or injury. This is very similar to today's gang culture, where 'respect' is demanded from even unknown passers-by.

According to Galatians 5:22-23, longsuffering is among the fruit that should be appearing in every Christian's life: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law." To Paul, and the other apostles, the Christian is a person who does not demand revenge, or react negatively, even when in a position to do so.

To further emphasise this point, I would cite the famous passage about Christian love in 1 Corinthians 13, where verse 7 tells us: "[Love] beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." The opening words of verse 4, in the same passage, state that "[Love] suffereth long, and is kind;" so one would judge therefore, that the Christian's life, whether at home, church, work or leisure, must be marked by patience and longsuffering.

Perhaps I ought, also, to return to the thought I began with when we considered 'longsuffering' in the Old Testament, and concluded that it was characteristic of God. The writers of the New Testament also traced it back to the same source. Peter, in 1 Peter 3, points to God's longsuffering and patience, which delayed judgment over the many years until the ark was built. In 2 Peter 3:9 he definitely claims that God's longsuffering is responsible for our salvation. Surely, we must accept as the consequence of this the obligation to treat our fellowmen, whether believers or non-believers, as patiently as God has treated us.

As we come towards the end of this morning's talk, we must spend some time to consider how the many afflictions that the Apostle Paul endured, in his service for the Lord, wrought patience in his character. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-33, Paul is compelled to catalogue his sufferings. We have not time to read all of this passage, so I will quote just verses 25 to 28: "Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches." The natural response to such afflictions would be to think again and to change direction. Not so with Paul, as he was empowered by the Spirit of God and so endured all that came against him.

He continues in chapter 12 of the same letter, but this time the affliction is personal and within, as we read in verses 7 to 10: "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." Later, in the same passage, the Apostle mentions that all this was 'wrought in all patience'.

We ought to pause to consider again the agony of this list. How many of us would willingly continue if it meant physical pain? Beatings and thrashings are no mean afflictions and the pain would not disappear quickly. Adrift in the sea for a night and a day is not something that I feel complacent about. Robbers, vandals, betrayal, hunger and thirst are not easy travelling companions.

We must not skip over the list with a shallow conception of the depth of Paul's deprivations and privations. Added to this was the care of the churches and the thorn in the flesh. Not all Christians are grateful for pastoral care where the aim is their spiritual growth and development. False teachings and teachers were always present offering a different gospel, legalism or licentiousness, for Paul to combat. There must have been much heartache and disappointments for Paul, as he sought the welfare of the saints at Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and the other places where he had planted a church.

Along with these was the crippling effect of the 'thorn in the flesh', which must have been a continuing check and dead weight upon his spiritual energy, yet he triumphs above it all! Through all of these manifest sufferings the patience of Christ was shaped in his character. His longsuffering, in the face of all circumstances, had very practical results. Philippians 4:11-12 tells us: "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need." The question might be asked where and how did Paul learn these things? The answer must be through his endurance and patience in the face of the catalogue of sufferings that have been listed above.

In conclusion, I offer a summary of the points that have been made in this morning's talk. We have seen from the Old Testament that 'longsuffering' and 'patience' are qualities revealed to us as essential characteristics of the God revealed through the writings of Moses, the psalmists and the prophets. The Old Testament is also clear that this divine forbearance demands a similar response from believers in their dealings with others.

In the New Testament a similar, yet enlarged, picture emerges which begins in the parables of the Lord, such as that outlined in Matthew 18, where forgiveness, forbearance and patience is required from the servant who had just been forgiven by the king. We must also learn that though patience is an element in God's dealing with man, it is not a device that can be manipulated by the creature to delay, forever, the judgment of God.

Longsuffering and patience are aspects of His love and grace towards mankind, as we learned from the quotation from Paul's letter to the Romans. What is true of God must find a reflection in the life and attitude of the believer. Many references could be used to support this claim, but I use 1 Thessalonians 5:14: "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men."

Sometimes this patience and longsuffering are to be shown towards events that happen to us, such as persecution, afflictions and trials. The Apostle James tells us that it is trial that can help to teach patience. In James 1:2-3 he writes: "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience." These trials can be necessary accompaniments to service, such as we saw in the life of Paul, when we read from 2 Corinthians. They could also be directly from the hand of God as an aspect of training, as a parent trains a child.

Hebrews 12:7 is an example of this: "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?" These trials could also be the result of undeserved affliction, as Peter informs us in his first letter: "For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God." (1 Peter 2:19-20).

These Scriptures, that I just read, are sufficient to indicate that God expects, and desires, a Christ-like patience from each one of us. I say Christ-like, for He is the great example that is ever set before us. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, in Hebrews 12:1-3, makes that abundantly clear:

“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.”

There can be no argument against the example of longsuffering by the Lord Jesus. Since He is still waiting ‘till His enemies be made the footstool of His feet’, so we in like manner, by the power of the Spirit of God, ought to demonstrate patience and long suffering in the sight of our fellow citizens. May the Lord grant us that patience of hope that marked the Christians at Thessalonica.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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