

We are taking a careful look at these Christian character traits that Paul is exhorting us to put on in Colossians 3:12-15. The reason I am taking them a few at a time is that if we go through them too quickly they pass by in a blur and all we get is a vague and general picture of the kind of people God is calling us to be as people saved by grace. While there is some overlap in the words that Paul uses here, each word or phrase has something to contribute to the biblical description of the Christian character we are being called to nurture. This evening we will consider patience and bearing with one another.

We are to seek to grow in these character traits because as believers we are part of the new humanity that God is creating as part of his great renewal of his creation which is rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is at work in his people renewing them in his image and the image of Jesus and that is something wonderful. The goal of growing to be more like Jesus is not presented as something burdensome and onerous, but as something wonderful and liberating.

God is working in us through his Spirit to make us more like Christ, but at the same time we are called to be active in this as well. God never treats us like robots, but his work in us makes us want to be what he is calling us to be and his work in us makes it possible for us to make the changes in our lives that make us more like Jesus. It takes effort on our part, but that effort is not hopeless because God is at work in us through his Holy Spirit. And one of the great influences that the Holy Spirit uses is the word of God itself. God intends for exhortations like the ones that we are looking at to make an impression upon us and have a shaping influence in our lives. It is by us thinking about and dwelling upon the virtues that Paul is telling us to put on, in the light of the whole gospel message, that God helps us to put them on.

So this evening we will dwell on what it means for us to be patient and what it means for us to bear with one another. These two virtues are closely related to one another and there is some overlap, but there is also something unique about each one. And so we will consider them one at a time.

So first we will consider patience. Now the kind of patience that Paul is talking about here is patience with people. It is also possible to be patient with circumstances which is more the idea of endurance. Or we can work patiently at a project. The idea of patience in general is broader than what Paul is focused on here. If you look at all the other virtues that Paul mentions in these verses, they all have to do with our relationships with one another and so the patience he is talking about here is patience with other people.

The term that is most often used to convey the idea of patience is slow to anger. And, of course, human patience with other people is rooted in God's patience with us. God is slow to anger with us. A key verse here is Exodus 34:6 where God refers to himself as slow to anger. That term is used of God many more times in the OT. The ESV always uses the word patience for this idea in the NT. Romans 2:4 speaks of the "riches of [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience."

So one of the key meanings of patience is slow to anger and the perfect example of this is God's patience with us. Clearly this does not mean that God is never angry. There is a lot in the Bible about the wrath of God against sinful people. But he is slow to anger. He is patient with people. He gives people the opportunity to repent. 2 Peter 3:9 says that God is patient ... not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

So as God renews us in his image he makes us more like himself also in this way – he makes us slower to become angry with other people. That does not mean that we should never be angry. If certain things make God angry, they should make us angry too. But it does mean that as we grow in Christian character, we will become slower to become angry and when we do get angry it will to a righteous anger like God's anger is always a righteous anger.

Now if we think about God's slowness to become angry, it gives us number of insights as to why we should be slow to anger as well. One reason is that God is slow to anger with us. When we look at the idea of forgiveness we will look at the relationship between God forgiving us and we forgiving others, but that basic idea applies to other virtues as well. We love because God has loved us. One of the motivations for patience is God's patience with us. There is obviously a problem if we are not patient with others when God has been so patient with us. In Jesus' great parable in Matthew 18 about the man who was forgiven a huge debt, but was not willing to forgive someone else a little debt, the guy that owed the little debt pleaded for patience. Matthew 18:29 "So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'"

So that is a great motivation for us to be patient with others. We must remember and dwell on the fact that God has been so patient with us. When we think of all the things that we do and fail to do and how God is so patient with us – how he does not lash out at us every time we do something that displeases him, that should help us when we are tempted to get angry with others. This is something that we need to think of often and regularly especially when we notice ourselves getting angry at other people in ways that are motivated by selfishness rather than love.

Another insight from God's patience that can help us to be patient with others is that God loves everyone in some sense and wants them to be blessed. I know that God's love is complicated and there are texts that speak about God's hatred of the wicked, but there is no question that there is a sense in which God desires the salvation of all men. As we have already seen from 2 Peter 3:9, God is "patient ... not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

We should be patient with people because we are to love them and wish for their salvation and their true wellbeing in the light of the gospel. Much of the time our anger with others is selfish. They have done something to displease us and our anger is destructive – we want to hurt them. God calls us to be more like him in that we are patient with people who tempt us to be angry because we love them and are more concerned about their well-being rather than how they irritate or inconvenience us. Love, as we will consider

in a later sermon, is about desiring and seeking the wellbeing of others. It is willing to give of ourselves in order to bless others. In many situations that will mean restraining our anger because we want to reflect God's love and be a blessing to people instead of cursing them.

Now when it comes to many of ways that other people might provoke us to anger, patience requires that we just overlook them. In the church we are to encourage each other to grow as Christians, but that does not mean that we are to intervene every time we see something in another that is sinful. If that were the case, life together would be insufferable. Thankfully, 1 Peter 4:8 tells us that "love covers a multitude of sins." And Proverbs 19:11 says "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense."

This principle covers most situations when it comes to exercising patience with other people. There is such a thing as righteous anger and there are situations in which it should lead us to lovingly and patiently confront the person who has angered us, but the focus of the Bible when it comes to human anger is mostly on controlling our anger or not being angry in the first place. And most of the time, the call to be slow to anger or patient as to do with covering a multitude of sins and overlooking an offense.

The reality is that believers in Christ are in the process of being changed to be more like Christ, but that we all have a long way to go. And so we will notice sins and weakness in our fellow believers and most of the time we are to show patience by overlooking those sins, realizing that we are all sinful people who are all seeking to grow towards Christlikeness but are not there yet. It would certainly not be conducive growing in holiness if we all were constantly confronting one another with every little sin.

There may be close relationships in which it is appropriate for husbands or wives or close friends to be more involved in helping each other grow where pointing out faults in love is appropriate and helpful, but even then the overlooking of faults will still need to be a significant part of the relationship.

So one way to think about patience is through reflecting on how God is slow to anger and how that concept applies to us. There is such a thing as righteous anger for human beings, but the focus on the Bible when it comes to anger is that it is hard for humans to do it right. And the bulk of our efforts when it comes to patience is learning to be slow to anger – or not to be angry at all.

We need still to think about the idea of patience as being slow to anger when the anger is there not because of other people's sins, but because they just irritate us. Irritation is a low-grade anger. And much of the time when we are irritated with other people it is not because of their sins, but just because they have a different opinion about something than we do, or something about them just bugs us, or they just rub us the wrong way. God has made us all different and one of the reasons we need patience is because of those differences do not always fit together well.

Christopher Wright has written on patience in his book called *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*, and he discusses this idea of patience with each other because we are all different. He says that we need patience,

“Simply because people are what they are – all different. We have different personalities and preferences, different likes and dislikes, different visions, and ambitions. And just because we are Christians, it doesn’t make those things blend into a nice warm fudge..... “[How] easily we get annoyed and upset with each other. We need so much patience to put up with all the people God has brought together in the church” (p.65) He quotes what he calls “a silly little poem” to illustrate this point. “To dwell in love with saints above –/ Oh that will be glory! / But to dwell below with saints we know - / Ah! That’s a different story!”

This poem is cute and funny, but it is also interesting in the light of the context in which Paul is exhorting us to put on these virtues. We have seen that Paul is exhorting us to put on these virtues in the light of the fact that we belong to the new humanity that God is renewing in his image. What that means is that what Paul is calling to do, is to live **now** the life that we will live **in perfection** when God is finished renewing us. It’s true that living with each other now is a different story, but what Paul in our text is calling us to do is to strive to live as close as we can to how we will live in glory in the here and now. One of the key ideas of the significance of the Christian life is that we are now already living the life of the new creation. We already now have eternal life. We are already now resurrected with Christ in that we share in his life. We are already now new creations. And so we are to look at our lives as Christians as reaching towards the life we will know in perfection when Jesus returns. And while we will not accomplish that perfectly in this life, we are being called to demonstrate before the world what the life the age to come looks like in the here and now.

When people look at the church they should get a glimpse of what it means for the saints above to dwell in love.

And part of what that means is training ourselves to be slow to anger – to be slow to become annoyed and irritated by people who think differently than we do or who have something about them that does not endear them to us. Some people we are naturally attracted to. Others not so much. Patience is necessary for the others.

So far we have looked at patience in terms of being slow to anger. There is another way of thinking about patience and that is as a form of long suffering. In the articles that describe the various ways that the Greek word that is here translated “patience” is used in the Bible and in the culture of the time, the word “longsuffering” is often used. And that comes close to the term that comes next in our text, “bearing with one another.” If we think about these terms, we see that we are still thinking about patience, but now the idea in the foreground is not being slow to anger but to be willing to suffer in our relationship with others and to be willing to bear with the things about them that irritate us.

Now the idea of longsuffering in relationships does not mean that we must just take any sin that is committed against us. Patience as longsuffering does not mean that a wife or a child should just take it if they are being abused by a husband and father, for instance. If someone is sinning against us we are to call them to

repentance and if repentance does not happen, we are to get others involved. So when we are speaking about long suffering we are not speaking about just taking it when others have seriously sinned against us.

But when it comes to the multitude of sins that Peter tells us to cover or the faults that Proverbs tells us to overlook or the things about other people that are not sinful, but just irritate us, patience means that we are to suffer those lesser sins or irritations in order to live together in harmony and love. For the most part this is low grade suffering, but it is a form of suffering for the glory of God and the unity and love of the church.

Bearing with one another is a closely related idea. According to one commentator, the Greek word that is here translated "bearing with," "has the sense of 'endure, bear with, tolerate' 'Put up with' catches the sense of an acceptance requiring an effort of will because the actions or attitudes in question are immature and tiresome." (Wright, Commentary, p.146).

We are to endure a little suffering and bear with the things about one another that are hard to take for the sake of the goal that God is moving us towards. The goal of living together in harmony and love in the here and now means being willing to suffer in the cause of loving people who sometimes are a pain. Suffering is a very big deal in the Christian life and in God's way of salvation. This is not the most severe suffering that we are talking about here when we are thinking about bearing with one another, but it is part of the picture. Pursuing God's glorious goal of love and unity among his people means being willing to bear the pain of loving people whom we are inclined not to love.

Jesus did that with his disciples. He had marvelous patience with them. They were pretty slow to understand what he was teaching them. At one point when he had come down from the mount of transfiguration and the disciples had not been able to heal a demon possessed boy, Jesus said to them "How long am I to bear with you?" Jesus had to bear with his disciples. They tested his patience. And that picture gives us a pretty good illustration of what it means to bear with one another.

Now this makes it sound like the church is full of unlikeable people. And that is not really true. God is at work in his people and so by grace we are not as unlikeable as we might otherwise be. I think for most of us the experience of being part of the church is not all bad and in fact pretty positive. The church is far from perfect, but there is evidence of God's grace and so there is a lot of graciously dealing with one another. It is not biblical to focus only on the bad and ignore what God has been doing in our life together as a church. It is a blessing to belong to the body of Christ and to receive God's blessings to us through the love of his people.

But there is enough of what I am talking about that you know what I am talking about. I don't think that any one of you was sitting here as I was describing how other people can sometimes irritate us and thinking to yourself, "What is he talking about?" I suspect that most of you were thinking about specific people. So while it is good and right to acknowledge the goodness of the love and unity that God is working in and among us, we are not yet at the point where patience and bearing with one another are no longer necessary.

We have a special need of these virtues during this time of pandemic. It is rather fascinating how pretty much every single church has people in it who take the precautions for spreading the virus more seriously and those who take the precautions for spreading the virus less seriously. There are different interpretations of how Romans 13 applies to this situation and how the call to obey God rather than man applies to this situation. And those differences are irritating. And so we have a heightened need to put on patience and bearing with one another in the light of these differences. There is some leeway in how to apply the relevant passages of God's word to this situation. There is no leeway when it comes to patience and with bearing with one another in love. The call to be patient with one another and to bear with one another in love is clear and unambiguous.

We are to be slow to anger. We are to cover a multitude of sins. We are to overlook faults. We are to bear the pain of loving those who think and act differently than we do in these things. Part of the suffering of the Christian life has to do with dying to self and exercising patience and bearing with one another are some of the ways that we die to self and live for Christ.

Now I want to talk a bit about how we grow in patience and bearing with one another. I have been talking about this all the way along before and during these sermons on putting on the Christian virtues that Paul is exhorting to us here. We have seen many times that this call to put on "compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and bearing with one another belongs to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. These things are what we are saved to do. Putting on these virtues is part of what salvation means. We are called to do it as those who are forgiven all our sins through faith in Jesus and as those in whom God is working through his Spirit to renew us after his image.

What Paul is calling us to do here is hard, but not burdensome and not onerous. But it is something that we are being called to do. God is at work in us and we can do nothing without him, but at the same time we are called to do what he is calling us to do. Paul here is calling us to put these virtues on.

How do we do that? What we are talking about here is growing toward maturity in Christian character. Back in chapter 1:28, Paul had written, "Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." So we are talking about growing toward maturity in Christ. And that is about growing toward a mature Christian character.

Character is about the kind of people we are and we reflect our character by what we habitually do. As we grow in maturity in Christ or a Christlike character, these character traits become more natural for us because they increasingly define what kind of people we are. This is a process – a lifelong process – but it has to do with habits and training and activities that form our character.

Think of the well-known Proverb about the training of children. "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6) This is about character formation. That is what we are called to do as parents – to form Christian character in our children – to train them.

Well that continues to apply to us. Certainly parents should be training their children in these Christian character traits, but we continue to need to train ourselves when we are adults. Paul uses this idea of training a number of times in his letters. One example is 1 Timothy 4:7 where he tells Timothy, “[T]rain yourself for godliness.”

Training is about practice. Training is about repetition. Training is about habits. Training takes time. It is slow and gradual. But amazing things are possible for people who discipline themselves to train diligently. Think of the musical skills or the athletic skills that people are able to master through training.

Well that is another perspective on how to grow in these character traits. We are taking enough time to think about them so that we will have a clearer understanding of what they are and so that we will see the beauty of them. The gospel message bristles with motivations and encouragements to put them on. We know that our efforts are not in vain because God is renewing us in his image.

And so the way to grow further is training – deliberate repetitive practice that forms habits that make up character. Practicing patience and bearing with one another again and again and again. Thinking about the goal and how we can make progress. Examining when we didn’t quite nail it and figuring out how to make corrections. And keeping at it day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year.

This kind of effort is not a denial of the gospel. It is the fruit of the gospel. To put on the virtues that Paul is urging us to put on here, we need to do the training without which progress is impossible.