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WHEN RIGHT IS WRONG

Philippians 4:5

By

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Philippians Lesson 23

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We live in a day when everyone is pushing for their rights: civil rights, women's rights, consumer's rights, labor rights, gay rights, children's rights and every other minority group's rights. There is a backlash now against so-called affirmative action, because white males are claiming that their rights have been infringed upon.

Standing up for one's rights seems almost American. One of the flags from the American Revolution shows a snake with the motto, "Don't tread on me!" We go to great lengths to prove that we won't allow anyone to push us around. When Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, a wealthy man asked him to take a lawsuit against a poor man who owed him \$2.50. At first Lincoln hesitated to take the case, but on second thought he agreed--if the wealthy man would pay him a fee of \$10 cash up front. The man quickly agreed and handed over the money. Lincoln went to the poor man and offered him \$5 if he would settle the debt. So Lincoln got \$5 for himself; the poor man made \$2.50; and the rich man got his \$2.50 debt settled at a cost of \$10! But, he got his rights!

We're all prone to this mentality of demanding our rights because it stems from the love of self. At work, at home, and in the church, we're quick to react when we feel that we've been treated unfairly. When someone wrongs us, we defend ourselves and let others know how we were mistreated. We take courses in assertiveness training so that we can learn how to stand up for ourselves and get our way (as if we needed training in how to do that!). As a pastor, I've watched people go from job to job, or from marriage to marriage, or from church to church, each time claiming that they were in the right, but others wronged them. Even if you grant that they were right, they were wrong because they were not practicing what Paul commends in our text, the Christian virtue of forbearance. He is telling us that ...

Right is wrong when we insist on our rights
and do not practice forbearance.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out (*The Life of Peace* [Baker], pp. 142-143) that in Philippians 4, Paul is implicitly speaking about the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). In verses 2 and 3 we have an exhortation to love; in verse 4, to joy; verse 6 to peace; and here, in verse 5, to patience and, I would add, kindness, goodness, and gentleness, all rolled into the one word variously translated "forbearance" (NASB), "gentleness" (NIV, NKJV), "moderation" (KJV), "magnanimity" (NEB), and "unselfishness" (Amplified). In our study, we first need to answer the question, "What is the meaning of the Greek word translated 'forbearance'?" Then, Why do we need this quality? How do we develop it? And, finally, How do we practice it without getting trampled on in this dog-eat-dog world?

I. WHAT IS FORBEARANCE?

Webster (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*) defines our English word, forbearance, as "a refraining from the enforcement of something (as a debt, right, or obligation) that is due." The Greek adjective (*epieikes*) occurs five times (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 3:2; James 3:17; 1 Pet. 2:18, plus Phil. 4:5, as a substantive) and is often translated, "gentle." The noun occurs twice (Acts 24:4; 2 Cor. 10:1). But it means more than our word "gentle" conveys. Lightfoot calls it "the opposite to a spirit of contention and self-seeking" (J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* [Zondervan], p. 160). He cites Aristotle, who contrasts the forbearing person with one who is precise as to his rights, a person who sticks to the letter of the law to get his due. Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker]) takes it to mean that we are not to be easily angered when we are wronged or suffer inconveniences or injustice.

Archbishop Trench (*Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], pp. 153-157) observes that the pattern for this quality is found in God, who goes back from the strictness of His rights against us, who allows for our imperfect righteousness, and does not exact from us the extreme penalties He has a right to exact. Trench points out that sometimes a legal right can become a moral wrong. The forbearing person goes back from the letter of right for the

better preserving of the spirit of what is right. He is not harsh in demanding extreme penalties. He is softened by God's grace and deals with others in the same manner. The word has the nuance of leniency, of not being so overly strict that we demand our "pound of flesh," even if it is our due.

Building on Trench's observations, William Barclay (*New Testament Words* [Westminster], pp.95-96) says that the basic thing about this word is "that it goes back to God. If God stood on His rights, if God applied to us nothing but the rigid standards of law, where would we be?" Then he observes, "We live in a society where men insist on standing on their legal rights, where they will do only what they are compelled to do, and where they desire to make others do all that they can compel them to do. Again and again we have seen congregations torn by strife and reduced to tragic unhappiness because men and women, committees and courts stood on the letter of the law. When a congregation's governing body meets with a copy of its Church's book of laws prominently displayed on the chairman's table trouble is never far away."

Perhaps these two quarreling women, Euodia and Syntyche, were each standing on their rights. Paul is gently urging all parties involved to demonstrate forbearance. It is not a quality of the natural man, because selflessness is at the core of it. It means that we value the relationship above our rights, so we graciously back off and stop demanding our own way, even if we have a right to it. So we might modify Webster's definition and say that *biblical forbearance means graciously refraining from insisting on our rights because we put love for others ahead of love for ourselves.*

II. WHY DO WE NEED FORBEARANCE?

There are at least four reasons we need to develop this quality:

1. We need forbearance to be like Jesus Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 10:1, Paul says, "I ... urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" The second word, "gentleness," is our word. The Corinthians were being bold and pushy, challenging Paul's apostolic authority. If necessary, he would come to them and flex his muscle and put the domineering, self-willed rebels in their place. But he does not want that kind of showdown, so he appeals to them to act in accordance with the meekness and

forbearance of Christ, who did not assert His rights as the Son of God. If we want to be like our Lord, we must not fight for our every right, but rather, graciously yield our rights for the sake of others.

2. We need forbearance to have God's joy and peace.

The verses in Philippians 4 are not disjointed; there is a connection between having God's joy (4:4) and being forbearing people (4:5). Often our joy is disrupted by people who wrong us or irritate us. If we respond by saying, "He has no right to treat me that way! I have my pride! I have my rights! I'm not going to let him get away with that!"--if we go that route, we'll lose our joy in the Lord.

If we respond that way, it reveals something about us, namely, our selfishness! So we need to confront it and confess to the Lord our love of self. And then, just absorb the offense. The Lord is near, both in the sense that He knows what happened and is able to deal with the one who wronged you; and, that His coming is near, when He will right all wrongs. So trust in Him to deal with the other guy's selfishness and you deal with your own by yielding your rights out of love. If the wrong against you disrupts your relationship with the other person, you may need to follow the steps I outlined in the message on verses 2 and 3. But love covers a multitude of sins, and it's often better just to let it go. Don't let your hurt feelings that stem from your selfishness rob you of your joy in the Lord.

3. We need forbearance to get along with others.

"Let your forbearing spirit be known to *all men*." We need this quality in all our relationships--in the church, where we step on each others' toes. We need it in our families, in the irritations of daily life. We need it in the world, at work or at school, where unscrupulous, self-seeking people often try to take advantage of us. We will leave behind us a trail of broken or strained relationships if we do not learn to be forbearing people--to yield our rights, to be gentle and gracious, not demanding.

If we experience frequent relational problems, chances are that we are not practicing the golden rule, treating others as we want to be treated ourselves (Matt. 7:12). We all go easy on our-

selves and we want others to treat us graciously. If I'm late for an appointment, I usually let myself off the hook with a good excuse-- I got caught in heavy traffic, or I just had too much going on. Rarely do I get angry with myself for being late. Even if I don't have a good excuse, I shrug my shoulders and say, "Oh, well, I'm only human!" But do I give others the same grace when they're late for a meeting with me, or do I think, "How inconsiderate of them!" If I go easy on myself and allow myself to make mistakes, I need to do the same with others. That's forbearance.

To be forbearing means that we will not be easily offended because self is not on the throne. We won't take it personally if we're slighted. We'll be gracious and give others the benefit of the doubt. We won't jump to the conclusion that they deliberately wronged us. We'll try to be understanding and make things easier for the other person. Love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor. 13:7, NIV). We need forbearance to get along with others.

4. We need forbearance to bear witness for Jesus Christ.

One of Paul's main concerns in Philippians is our witness. In his own situation, he wants Christ to be proclaimed in every way (1:18, 20). He wants us as the church to conduct ourselves "in a manner worthy of the gospel" (1:27). He tells us to do all things without grumbling or disputing, so that we will shine forth as lights in the world (2:14-16). As we saw last week, if we lack God's joy, especially in times of trials, we will not be effective witnesses of the power of the gospel. The same will be true if we are not forbearing people.

There is a cartoon strip in our local paper called "Crabby Road." The character is a grouchy, cantankerous, old woman who doesn't let anybody push her around and who makes life as miserable as she can for everyone else. Maybe people find it funny because it appeals to the flesh. Deep down inside, we all have a mean streak like that woman that says, "Who cares about others? I need to look out for myself! I'm going to fight for everything I deserve!" But if we live like that, we are not showing the spirit of our Savior to a lost world. And people who are like the cartoon woman are invariably lonely, alienated people because they do not practice biblical love.

Paul says, "Let your forbearing spirit *be known* to all men." In other words, "Go out of your way to show others that you are gracious, forgiving, patient, not easily offended, that you're quick to yield your rights and give preference to the other person." This quality is so unlike the world's way that we will stand out as distinct and have opportunities for witness.

III. HOW DO WE DEVELOP FORBEARANCE?

Paul tells us how to develop this quality by adding, "The Lord is near." He could mean two things, both of which are true: He could mean, since the Lord is always present, always a witness to our relationships, keeping that fact in mind will help us to put self to death and to show forbearance to those who act insensitively toward us. We should always act as we would if the Lord were standing there watching us. A number of verses in the Old Testament give assurance to God's people, especially when others oppress them, that the Lord is near (Ps. 34:18; 119:151; 145:18). He is near for us to take refuge in Him. He is near for us to call upon for strength to endure patiently any difficult person or situation we encounter. As Hebrews 13:5-6 assures us, since the Lord Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?" Remembering the presence of the Lord will enable us to be forbearing.

Or, Paul could mean, since the Lord's coming is near, when He will make right all wrongs and will judge those who have selfishly taken advantage of you, entrust yourself to His care when you are wronged. Paul's reference just a few verses before to the Lord's coming (3:20-21) is the main support for this view. Scripture tells us never to take vengeance when we are wronged, because that prerogative belongs to the Lord alone (Rom. 12:19-20). If not in this life, we know that at the judgment the Lord will deal with the one who wronged us. Our duty is to be patient and forbearing, and to show grace to the person in the hope that he will repent and get right with God. If you don't need grace from the Lord, then I suppose you can be strict and demand full justice from those who wrong you. But if you need God's grace, then you need to show His grace to others through forbearance.

IV. HOW DO WE PRACTICE FORBEARANCE WITHOUT GETTING TRAMPLED ON OR WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE TRUTH?

By this time you're probably thinking, "If I practice forbearance, I'm going to get walked on! It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. You've got to stand up for your rights or everyone will take advantage of you. I live with (or work with) some aggressive, assertive people. How can I practice forbearance without getting run over?" Three things to keep in mind:

1. Remember that you are accountable first and foremost to the Lord, not to other people.

You are the Lord's servant or steward, and one day you will give an account to Him for how you spent your time, your money, and how you used the spiritual gifts He entrusted to you. You can't allow pushy people to determine your schedule or priorities. Jesus was forbearing, but He didn't allow others to dictate His ministry (Mark 1:35-39; John 7:1-10). Sometimes Paul stood up for his rights, but his motive was not self-love, but love for the gospel (Acts 16:35-40; 25:11). There are times when it is not loving to let an aggressive person continue walking all over you and everyone else. The loving thing is to confront the person and not allow them to dominate you. Check your motives!

2. Learn to discern the essential from the peripheral; don't bend on essentials; give room on peripherals.

Through a growing knowledge of God's Word, our only standard for truth, we must learn to discern what *doctrines* are essential to the faith and which are less crucial. What *methods* are so wrong biblically that they must be discarded, and which ones are tolerable, even though not perfect? What *behaviors* will shipwreck a person's faith, and which are, perhaps, not desirable, and you hope the person will grow out of them, but they aren't going to destroy the person at the moment? Your goal is to love the other person; biblical love always seeks the highest good of the one loved, namely, that the person grow to be like Christ. As we saw in Philippians 1:9, love must be coupled with discernment or it is not love at all.

One example: A Christian widow in her sixties in the church I pastored in California became engaged to an unbelieving man. One

of our elders, who was very close to her, and whom she helped support in his ministry, told her how happy he and his wife were for her and wished her God's blessing. But he didn't confront her sin of becoming unequally yoked with an unbeliever! When I heard of what he had done, I was flabbergasted. He defended himself by saying that he was just being loving toward her. I suppose he could have said he was being forbearing. But I argued that he wasn't being loving at all, because biblical love doesn't let someone head for a cliff without warning them. Forbearance must always be tempered by love.

The same thing applies to doctrine. If a person is toying with teaching which denies the deity of Jesus Christ, it is not loving to be forbearing. It will destroy his faith if he goes down that road, and so we must strongly warn him. There are other errors that may not totally shipwreck his faith, but it will hinder his growth. But you don't need to come on quite as strongly. Forbearance, like love, must be coupled with biblical discernment.

3. Remember that growth is a life-long process.

If you have to deal with an irritating person, show them as much grace as God has shown you. If a guy is coming from a difficult background, it may take time for him to learn to be sensitive and loving to others. You've got to model love as you work with a difficult person, giving him room to grow. Remember, God didn't dump the whole load on you all at once. He is patient, tolerating our weaknesses, but still confronting us as we are able to bear it, moving us ahead in godliness. We have to show the same grace to others.

Conclusion

At the 1965 Wimbledon Tennis Finals, a linesman called "Fault" on a player's second serve. The player was sure that his serve had been within the line, so he protested to the umpire, but the umpire upheld the linesman's call. The server lost the point. But his opponent was also certain that the serve had been fair and that he should have lost the point. So when the next serve came over the net, he stood aside and let it go by, conceding the point (story in Leonard Griffith, *This is Living* [Abingdon], p. 120). He had "the right" to take the point, but he knew it would have been

wrong. So he showed forbearance by graciously refraining from insisting on his rights.

Are you letting your forbearing spirit be known to your mate? Are you gracious and patient when he or she fails or falls short? What about with your kids? Some well-meaning Christian parents are so rigid and strict with their children that they provoke them to rebellion. We need to be as forbearing with our children as the Lord is with us. What about toward other believers? Do you give them room to grow and be different than you in peripheral matters, or do you insist that they agree with you or you cut them off? You can be right and yet be wrong if you fail to practice the Christian grace of forbearance.

Discussion Questions

1. How do we practice forbearance without getting sloppy about sin? How do we show grace and yet hold to godly standards?
2. How do we know when to absorb a wrong against us (or an irritation) and when to confront it?
3. Is it ever right for a Christian to be assertive and stand up for his rights? If so, when?
4. How do we determine whether a problem is essential or peripheral? Are there shades of gray in between?

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