

Patience and Persistence

Dear Cody,

Often I'm asked for my favorite text. That's a question just about impossible to answer. One text out of the 30,442 in Holy Writ! But if the inquirer focuses on my number-one guideline for ministry, I can reply without hesitation—it's Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 15:58 to be steadfast in the Lord and abounding in his service. Steadfastness—not an obtuse, self-righteous rigidity, but a sort of sanctified stick-to-itiveness—is what I have found to be an indispensable element in effective Christian service. So take a moment, friend, and reflect on how patience and persistence are foundational in three areas of our lives.

First, we must have *patience and persistence in our service to others*. Honestly, as I look back across the years, too often I have observed pastors who have abandoned a post prematurely that was initially accepted with enthusiasm as the place of God's assignment. To be sure, I don't walk in another person's shoes, and perhaps in the same instance I would have thrown in the towel as well. Yes, Spirit-guided wisdom is definitely needed to know when and if one should leave a certain charge. But I wonder at times whether a white flag was prematurely raised because the work was stagnant, the critics vituperative or the battle too uncomfortably hot.

Even in the best of ministries, where conflict is minimal, patience and persistence are called for. The people who make up our congregations or who inhabit our mission fields require us to exercise patience perhaps not day in, day out, but again, and again, and still again. A pastor, for example, may be blessed with mostly supportive, appreciative people who encourage him or her and kindly overlook shortcomings. However, in almost every church there are also problem members who create difficulties. Faithful in attendance, generous in stewardship, they are nevertheless like tiny thorns that gnaw into one's toes on a long walk. How gifted they are—as faultfinders! What talents they possess—as obstructionists! What rare abilities they exhibit—as chronic complainers and morale-saboteurs! They delight to engage in protracted telephone monologues. After services on Sunday morning, they buttonhole the preacher and carry on a one-sided conversation. Each acts as if he were the sole church-member entitled endlessly to the pastor's attention. Yet these are the very sheep whose insistent bleating signals their need for shepherding care. Only with patience and persistence can we redirect these challenging sheep.

Second, dear friend, *patience and persistence are loudly called for in honestly facing the blemished reality of our own characters*. If I am to exercise a Christ-like patience with other inch-by-inch pilgrims (*A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out*³⁴ Matthew 12:30), what about patience with the still-conflicted person who is myself? Yes, we need patience with ourselves.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we indulge in a bland self-acceptance that makes us indifferent to entrenched sins that are excused as inborn traits incapable of change. Granted our temperament is genetically given, but I dare not use it to sanction morbidity, laziness, egocentricity, or a shoulder-shrugging, slap-happy attitude towards the agonies of human experiences. Nor can I relax my efforts to overcome pride, anger and gluttony because I regard them as psychic givens. Not in the least! The biblical ideals and imperatives motivate an ongoing struggle against the flesh, to say nothing of struggle with the world and the devil. At the same time my snail-like growth in grace requires patience and persistence.

Have patience, oh positional saint, as, grateful for God's unconditioned acceptance of yourself in Christ, you continue the ascent like a climber inching up Mount Everest. Have patience and persistence to prevent inching growth in sanctification from driving you to despair or from inducing a mood of self-disparagement, self-disgust and occasional bursts of frenzied efforts to practice self-crucifixion. Yes! Patience and persistence! Acknowledge those fleeting feelings of weary defeat, which may assail the soul, yet refuse to yield, resolutely refuse to give up because there are even months of self-despair and self-disgust interspersed with days of harsh self-discipline. Relax! Reckon on your God-bestowed unchangeable self-identity in His son and move ahead in your faith-journey with confident persistence.

Finally, Cody, according to no less an Authority than Jesus Christ I must have *patience and persistence with God*. With God? Doesn't the mere thought of

that verge on blasphemy? Not in view of our Lord's two parables about stubbornly insistent intercession, the stories of the man who keeps knocking on his friend's door at midnight and the widow who with dogged shamelessness pursues the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8; Luke 14:15-23).

God's silence as we cry for his help, God's delay in granting a fervent plea repeated and repeated, the mystery of why in wisdom and love He is forcing us to show the depth and sincerity of our request and compelling us to develop a total trust in His camouflaged wisdom and love—these are indeed hard lessons in persistence with respect to one's God-relationship. And these lessons, let me confess, I have by no means mastered. Yet these tough assignments in the curriculum of spirituality cannot be side-stepped.

Well, there you have the candid advice of a pilgrim-pastor-professor who has taken 1 Corinthians 15:58 as his guideline in ministry. May our Lord bless your faithful, persistent service!

Your friend,

Vernon Grounds

Denver Seminary, Denver, Colorado

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you.

*Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,
because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

1 Corinthians 15:58