

"THE GRACE OF ENDURANCE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Back in the days when I was a counsellor at Summer Church Camp up in the Adirondacks one of the resources we used was a learning game entitled, "If you were arrested for being a Christian, what evidence would there be against you?" Perhaps you're familiar with the game.

We would set up a court room with a judge and a jury, a defense attorney and a prosecuting attorney and ask some of the teenagers to be defendants. The purpose of the game was to come up with the New Testament description of a faithful Christian life. And at the conclusion it was always a surprise to so many who were there as to what that description was, because the expectation of most of us is that a Christian has an easy time of it. Things go his or her way, success comes easily, accidents are avoided and illnesses rapidly cured, conflicts are resolved.

And then we would compare that description with a passage from one of Paul's Letters such as the passage that Jan read earlier. And in this passage Paul is not presenting evidence to a court, but he is making a case. He's simply trying to prove to the Corinthians that he is an authentic Christian. You see wherever Paul went in the Mediterranean world, his detractors followed him. They'd come into a Church and disrupt things and claim that Paul wasn't a real Christian. So Paul was forever trying to counteract what they were saying about him. He had to defend himself against their charges; he had to present his credentials, and so in Chapter 6 of Second Corinthians, we read:

"As servants of God...we commend ourselves
in every way through great endurance..."

DEVELOPMENT

That's where he begins. That's the primary credential that he offers to establish himself as the "Real" thing - an authentic Christian. "We commend ourselves in every way through great endurance" and then he goes on to say "endurance in afflictions, beatings, calamities, hardships, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watchings and hunger". So you begin to have a picture of someone who is not having an easy time of it in life. As a matter of fact, you begin to feel that Paul's troubles didn't end the day that he chose to follow Christ; it's the other way around. You sense his troubles began the day he became a Christian.

Now in the first part of that list are those things that are the result of his traveling around the world as an apostle in a minority, persecuted religion. He talks about "afflictions, beatings, calamities, imprisonments, hardships, tumults"- all that kind of stuff. You see Paul as a missionary in a hostile environment, facing angry crowds, getting arrested, thrown into jail.

But two of the last three complaints in the list are common to all of us: labors and watchings. First, labors. He had to work for a living. He had to struggle to make ends meet, just as we do, probably even more so since he had two jobs, really...as an apostle and also at a secular trade. He worried over his finances. He carried that burden. Sometimes he was forced to go without.

And then the word "watchings" which is best translated as "sleepless nights". I'm so glad he put that in. I guess there were times when he woke up in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, his heart beating rapidly. I remember once having that complaint and going to the doctor who gave me a good physical

examination. After it was all over he brought me into his office and sat me down and said something like this, "Clarke, I can give you a prescription, or you can practice what you preach!" He didn't know what I was preaching since he never came around here on Sunday, but I think I knew what he meant. He meant that I should be able to go to bed at night...say my prayers...and turn everything over to God. Don't worry so much. He meant, "Look, you should be able to sleep like a baby". (I remember somebody once saying that he slept like a baby...that he woke up very three hours and cried. How many of us have done that!)

THE IMAGE WE HAVE

Now the image we have of being a Christian is usually that of having an easy time of it and handling it all with great ease, We're supposed to be able "to let go and let God". And that's not always the easiest thing to do...as a matter of fact, for some it's easier to let God have it than it is for them to let go of it. They let God have it but not entirely...they hang on to it, too.

And so personally I take some comfort to know that Paul had his share of sleepless nights along the way, that he had a few anxieties to carry along, some hours of watching. Chances are he felt overworked, as we sometimes do. Yes, Paul had his share of "afflictions, beatings, calamities, hardships, hunger, imprisonments, labors and sleepless nights.". And the mark of his discipleship as a follower of Jesus was that he endured all of those things and managed to stay on the path. Note this: he didn't get rid of them, but rather he endured them and that is part of what I want to hold up before you this morning as a mark of solid, steady, mature discipleship. Call it, if you will, the grace of endurance.

WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT OUR RELIGION TO DO

Now when we get into a tough situation in life what should we expect our religion to do for us? What can we expect from our faith? If we are to "practice what we preach" - what will it look like?

I think the answer is bound up in this phrase that I'm going to put before you: the grace to endure and the ability to endure gracefully. And that's not the easiest thing to come by. That's not our expectation, is it? Most of us expect life to be easier for us. We expect to be able to get rid of our burdens and not just to carry them. I came across something that E. Stanley Jones, that great evangelical spirit, once said:

"Christianity doesn't promise solutions, but rather goals and the power to move toward them..."

Leo Buscaglia is a psychologist and a lecturer, an author and an occasional guest on TV Talk shows. He's been called the "love" doctor and believes in giving "hugs". His latest book, "Living, Loving and Learning" is a best seller and a friend - a doctor-friend - with whom I jog gave me a copy of it last May. He inscribed this thought at the front, "Phil...This is what it's all about as we jog along.... Enjoy, Alan".

One time on TV, Leo Buscaglia talked about his mother. She was an Italian immigrant, of the "old school", possessed all the "old values". She believed in things like hard work. One day Leo went to his mother and said he wanted to go to Paris and spend a year there. He was just a young man, still a student in School. But he wanted to drop out of school and go to Paris and live the Bohemian life, get a garrett on the Left Bank, be with his heroes, among them John Paul Sartre, the French Extentialist philosopher...his mother couldn't understand him. Why would he ever want to do anything like that?

She said to him, "You can go. You are a man now. You can go. You now make the decisions that will determine the rest of your life. So you must remember that you will live with the consequences of the decisions that you make." And so off to Paris he went. He rented a garrett apartment, sat in sidewalk cafes all day long and discussed art and angst, dread and despair, love and joy - and he had a wonderful time.

But pretty soon he ran out of money and he sent a wire home asking his mother for help. He thought that he had better sign the wire with a name that would touch his mother's heart-strings and purse-strings, hopefully. He remembered the name she had called him when he was a little boy. He knew that would touch the warm, motherly part of her. The name he used was Felici. So he sent a wire that read, "Dear Mother. Starving. Love, Felici", And he got back a wire that read, "Dear Felici. Starve. Love, mother".

We expect life to be easy. We assume that when we're in trouble someone will always bail us out. We expect our religion to do that. We expect to have the sorrow pass quickly. We expect the tribulation to be eliminated easily. We expect the loneliness to be taken away from us when we want it to be taken away. And there are times when the word comes back to us from life. "Endure". "Not yet. You can't have it relieved. Endure it. Hang in there." Like Paul and others since then.

BEING A CHRISTIAN: WHAT DIFFERENCE THEN DOES IT MAKE?

Which raises the question: what difference

then does it make, being a person of faith. If being a Christian doesn't change any of that, then what difference does it make. The difference it makes - and listen carefully - is that we are given grace to endure and the ability to endure gracefully.

That doesn't mean that you just accept hardship, affliction and whatever. You should try to avoid them and if you're in them, you should try to get out of them. In the meantime, you're going to have to endure them. And the way you do is the test of your faith.

The next verse in this text describes how Paul endured it all. (verse 6) Listen to what he said. He endured by "purity" which best translated means "personal integrity". In a time of trial and endurance he held on to the highest values that he knew. He didn't give up, nor did he given in. He did not compromise his values.

He then listed "knowledge" which means using your head, your common sense, learning from the experience, gaining wisdom; it's what the Old Testament had in mind when it said, "Teach us to number our days so we will gain a heart of wisdom".

And then "forbearance" which means patience. Then "kindness" which means thinking of others and a little bit less of yourself. The "Holy Spirit" comes next which means asking for help outside yourself. "Genuine love" which means the ability to give of yourself to other people. "Truthful speech" which means honest communication that unfolds when you are open and honest with others. And finally, "the power of God" which means that you have come to understand in your life that there is a power and a strengthen greater than your own which can come into play.

Those are the gifts that come to those who endure. And those are the gifts that those who endure so often without knowing it pass on to others. And so we

see Paul ending this section with this wonderful word, "As having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

CLOSING These are days when we should be getting ourselves in shape spiritually, so that when the time of testing comes our way, we may bear it faithfully and make a profound contribution to the life of the world around us by the way we endure what is happening to us. Today is Reformation Sunday and we think of Martin Luther. No flabbiness there. What power and strength in his life that grew out of his faith. And tomorrow is All Saints' Day and we think of something Simone Weil once said, "Our world needs saints just as a plague stricken town needs doctors".

And so I close with this story. Bishop Raymond Grant fifteen years ago was Bishop of the Methodist Church in Oregon. In his last years he endured ill health and he endured it gracefully. He endured it in such a way that those who knew him in those days still testify to the gifts that he gave those around him. And something of what he meant to his people out there was captured and kept in a letter he sent to his colleagues. Because of so many surgeries in his last year and his ebbing strength, he was glad, he said, that when he read the sports page of the paper and the basketball scores in particular, that they recorded not only the baskets scored and points made, but they also were listing the rebounds. And his comment was:

"I have reached that point in the game of life when I am no longer scoring points. But I am setting a new record in the rebound column".

Paul probably had one of the best records ever for the world's greatest number of rebounds - for endurance. "We commend ourselves to you through great endurance". Let that be our pattern as we move into some busy and very demanding weeks - in our lives, in our church, here in our city. Give us all that measure of grace to endure and the ability to endure gracefully these greater demands and those times of testing that life places upon us all! So be it!

LET US PRAY Our lives are not always easy, O God, and we ask for the strength and the patience, the faith and the humor to "hang in there" - to face those many problems and concerns that each day brings into our lives. Help us to endure gracefully the headaches and the heartaches of life, knowing that in the great mystery of your love in Jesus Christ, that "all things work together for good".

In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.