

# Marion weekly update

*SERMON March 17, "Keys to Kindness: Patience"*

*Proverbs 15:18, 1 Corinthians 13:1-8, 1 Samuel 13:8-14*

This week our key to kindness is patience. I'm sure this is a fair no brainer. Patience is simply the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset. As we've noted multiple times in this series, feelings of anger and upset are frequently the triggers for unkindness. Keeping a cool head in troubling circumstances is essential for unconditional and consistent kindness. That cool head brings clarity and an ability to keep things in perspective. It enables us to remember that a situation is only made worse by unkind words and actions, and so we have the energy to exercise restraint.

This is all easy to say but not necessarily easy to do. Imagine having to get somewhere on time and suddenly the interstate is a parking lot. Every minute that ticks by is one more minute late. We don't know how our tardiness will be received. Thank goodness for cell phones. At least we can make a call to let whomever know about the delay. But the stress is there and often building. We get irritable and cranky. Sometimes we pity whomever is in the vehicle with us. Our patience is tested and we don't do too well on the exam.

It is my sense that part of why the stress builds and those negative feelings crop up is we don't like to feel powerless. That's really a key to growing patience. When we have to wait it's a powerless feeling. Whether it's an answer, the arrival of a package, waiting for someone to grow, to change, or for a bad circumstance to pass the common root is that the ball is often entirely in someone else's court. Whatever it is we want depends on the other, and we can't demand our timeline. There are factors upon factors that can get in the way.

We have to own that we are powerless and accept it. When we accept it and allow patience to reign there is a freedom. Not a lack of caring, freedom. We can do our part whatever it may be and then let the rest go. There's no use in worrying and fretting about things we can't affect. Precious moments are wasted and destroyed when we allow the upset and the anger to work their way into the waiting process. Going back to the traffic jam, that time can be filled with contention and angst among the passengers or it can be filled with singing along to the radio or getting to know one another better.

Imagine receiving a voicemail at work at 3:30 on Friday, the boss has left for the day, and it's telling you to be at an urgent meeting at 10 on Monday morning. There's nothing you can do. If the waiting is filled with anxiety, a perfectly good two days off could be ruined. On the other hand if we can let go of what we can't control, we may enter Monday relaxed and refreshed from a nice weekend.

Our world doesn't do a good job cultivating patience. Instant gratification is all over.

Think about in the days before self-checkouts, the internet, and just tapping a card on a screen to pay for something. If you wanted something you had to get out of the house, drive to the store, hope they had what you wanted or store hop until someone did, and if you couldn't find it actually engage an employee who could direct you. You waited in line until it was your turn with the person behind the register. If you weren't using cash out came that fifty pound "chu chunk" machine to run the carbon paper over your credit card. The ones with the raised numbers and name. Then take it home and it's yours.

Heaven forbid you ordered something. Fill out an actual paper order form, seal it in an envelope, take it to the post office, then wait for the snail mail to deliver it, for the company to process it, for them to fill the order, pack it, ship it, and then however long it took to make it to you. You might even have to travel back to the post office to pick it up. All totaled it might take long enough to forget you even ordered it.

These basic things were common. It cultivated a patience.

Today in this sanctuary if you get bored with my message within 5 minutes you could order a chair on Amazon that might be at your door tomorrow and get all your children registered and paid up for

spring soccer. Instant gratification.

Patience is a necessary quality for more than kindness.

Proverbs mentions something we already noted. Patience puts away contention. If we can be patient we can take the time to listen to one another and misunderstandings decrease. If you've ever been woodpeckered to death by someone asking for your time or attention when you've clearly asked them to wait until you finish something you know what it's like to have your own patience tested. It's tested because someone else has no patience and it turns into pestering. A little patience goes a long way in keeping interactions smooth and civil.

Saul's story is an unfortunate one and a cautionary tale. Samuel gave him strict instructions to wait for him. Saul grew impatient and panicked and the offering Samuel was to perform he took on himself. As he finishes up here comes Samuel. The price of his impatience was that his legacy was destroyed. He could have had an enduring reign passed down his family line. Instead it would end with him and another would reign instead.

Patience is essential to fully receive what God has for us. God's timing and desires aren't necessarily ours. If we try to force something before it's time we may sabotage the very blessing God had in mind. We may see something that's not really there and jump at it, missing the better thing that was coming down the line. So many things that happen in our lives require tempering, training, and transformation. Rarely does it happen overnight. Patience enables us to put in the work. It's amazing how often the answers to our prayers, the direction we seek, and purpose we desire is found in that work. Rushing it or getting upset because it's taking "too long" is a sure way to make it take longer or not happen at all.

The famous chapter 13 in Corinthians puts love at the front of traits that describe what it means to love. Patience actually rears up again in that same chapter. Love "endures all things". Enduring happens when we are patient. Loving endurance. None of us are perfect which means we're all in a constant state of growing. We're all in a constant learning curve. Loving one another and sticking with one another means we have to have patience as we wait on one another to move beyond whatever struggle we're working on at the time. It means we know that once one struggle is overcome another is coming right on the other end of it. Love means waiting on one another throughout a lifetime of becoming.

Without patience there is no love. Without patience every relationship would fall apart.

God is described as long-suffering. God is patient waiting through years and generations for people and nations to follow God's direction and become what they were meant to become. Not some pale, twisted version of God's vision. And God is love. If we're called to be imitators of God then love and patience are at the top of the list.

Be patient. Be love. Be what the world needs to grow, and needs to see so it has a model of what good and Godly truly look like.

## BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 12

The first two verses of this chapter set up the first portion of the event described. Samuel has done his duty. He is also old now. He makes a peculiar statement given what we know of his sons from a previous chapter. He announces the presence of his sons as if that's a good thing. Prior they were described as corrupt. Unfortunately there is nothing uttered other than this. We don't know what has become of his sons. Perhaps they are the same as they ever were and Samuel is clueless. On the other hand given that he is old, maybe there has been a change. Maybe his sons have seen the light and changed to become more like their father. Regardless we do not know any more than is explicitly stated. That said I do think in the spirit of cultivating grace in our hearts and minds it's good to not jump to a negative conclusion, but to allow that what's unwritten could also be positive.

What is transpiring here is that Samuel is passing a torch of leadership to Saul. He's been the prime judge over Israel. He's heard civic matters and spiritual. He's been the prophet trying to shape the people's life together towards God. Now that there is a king his role diminishes. Saul has the mantle

of military leadership and civic governance. He is stepping back, but not out of the picture altogether. Samuel does something customary then with little modern equivalent, though in a moment we'll draw a parallel best we can. His speech asking if he's engaged in any wrongdoing was to allow him to pass on his role in innocence. If he's done wrong now is the time to say so and he will make restitution. Because Samuel has judged with integrity he has no fear that the people will have a cause against him. The people confirm as much and so Samuel moves on with a clean public record. No one can say otherwise.

Perhaps today we might liken it to a finance officer of a major corporation of several decades. The officer knows that everything has been conducted properly and the book kept in pristine fashion. Upon retirement the officer wants to ensure that if the new officer pulls some shady stunts that individual can't blame the retiree for the discrepancies or missing funds. So the officer orders a third part audit of all the books that have been kept in his/her tenure. The audit is affirmed, signed, witnessed, etc. This is a mark of integrity of work, and thus if any accusations are brought after the fact the matter has already been settled.

Next comes a formula of prophetic judgment. Samuel literally says as much.

First comes the reminder of what has been. The wonders of God saving Israel are enumerated, specifically looking at the judges. This of course would be the main reference point as the nation had not been under kingly rule and the time of the prophets was in the workings. Nevertheless Israel is reminded that time and again God has been her deliverer. This has been their blessing.

At the same time there has been a history of forsaking God. When this has happened they were allowed to suffer the consequences of their faithlessness and actions for a time. This has happened once again in their own time. Samuel casts this judgment upon them. In fear they stepped away from God and asked for a king. This is counted as sin and evil against the people. Remember, the people essentially said "we don't need you to lead us God, we'll take a human king." And Samuel told them all the consequence that would come with it.

Once again to return to the corporate example. Imagine a higher up who made a great salary, had wonderful perks, lots of vacation time, phenomenal retirement, and so forth. For some reason he decides to bad mouth his own company to the competition. Time and again he's warned to stop. He doesn't and ultimately he's fired, particularly because his trash talking is hurting their reputation. He gets pulled in to the office. "Look, we gave you lots of money, lots of extras, and treated you well. You could been set for life. All you needed to do was stop talking trash to the competition. Well, that's all over. Not only are you fired but we're coming at you with a defamation lawsuit and you'll be lucky to find a job bagging groceries after all this is done."

A time of blessing. Bad behavior. Consequence and negative fallout.

Looking back to a term we highlighted last chapter, Samuel give them a glimmer of hope with a very Deuteronomistic covenant. If they and the king follow God and do what is right they will be just fine. If they do not they will not. It's a pretty simple formula. Once again, this follows a not atypical sense of prophetic judgment. Frequently God sends a judgment but also provides a way out of the most negative of consequences should repentance and faithfulness be at play. These are almost always "if/then" covenants. If you do this then this will happen.

We see this with parents and children all the time. "Clean up the garage and you'll get \$20. If it's not done by 5 you can't go out with your friends until it's done and it drops to \$10." If it's done the kid is twenty richer. If not the consequence stands, and too often the kid is fitful because they want the reward for doing correctly even when they haven't.

There is also an oddity. When Saul was installed as king it wasn't the Ammonites who were the threat, it was the Philistines. Saul had been put in place but returned home where he was plowing with his oxen. When he heard about the Ammonites "the Spirit of the LORD fell upon him" and he rallied Israel to battle. This was his first major victory as king. So was it the Philistines or the Ammonites? One explanation is that the writer simply highlights the Ammonites for the sake of flow from one chapter to the other. Another could be that just because the Philistines were a problem doesn't mean the Ammonites weren't as well. Again, there is much that goes unwritten and so while we may

not know we can at least speculate.

Also necessary to keep in mind is that the literalist streak of interpretation gets in the way of finding truth many times. The writer is trying to condense a LOT of history into a short space to give a snapshot not just of what happened, but also how God worked through what was happening. The writing is also in the lens and framework of someone who has a lot of hindsight and is trying to demonstrate for a people in exile something hopeful about the God they serve. Keep in mind that if this book was written in the Babylonian exile, no one prior would have read it. There is much layered into the intention of the writer and so we need to be less worried about trying to sort details that were never intended to be taken literally and more concerned with finding what meaning and what of God the writer is revealing.

To confirm that this judgment and covenant are accurate Samuel calls on God to bring rain in the harvest season. Harvest season would have been uncommonly dry as the growing season would have been when the rains were more prevalent. Having rain summoned on demand is a sign that something bigger is happening. It is also a sign that Samuel is still God's spiritual leader for the people. He's stepped back from some responsibilities but is still front and center of their spiritual, theological, religious life. A loud thunder and the rains come, terrifying the people.

This isn't the first time thunder inspired fear. It was thunder that sent the Philistines into a panic making them easy pickings for the Israelites. Natural phenomenon were often mistaken for action of a god or gods. They didn't have the scientific understanding of why they occur and so attributed them to the only might beings they had, the gods. Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, storms, all of these disasters were angry gods. Thunder was another example.

It's significant here to remember that the idea of attributing natural "disasters" to God has gone by the wayside. This is a good thing as it places natural occurrences in their proper understanding without scapegoating people out of speculation. Disasters fall on good and bad alike. Allow actions and values to speak to the quality of a person or group of people.

Adam Hamilton also makes a fantastic point about what we call natural disasters. They are only disasters because people are in the way when they happen. If people weren't, they wouldn't be disasters. A giant wave crashing in the middle of the ocean isn't a disaster. A giant wave crashing on Miami is. In reality these natural events are the earth's natural way of self-correcting in order to maintain the balance necessary for life to exist.

The people, though, are terrified. They ask a telling favor. "Pray to YOUR God to save us!" YOUR God. Not OUR God. These kind of little language bits are indicative of where a person's or people's faith is. If I haven't fully given over to God I'm asking someone who has to pray hoping that God will help out on their word. What God asks is that if we have a request it be on and through our own strong faith in God. The people are slipping already.

Samuel is giving them whiplash here. He gives them a hopeful covenant, then terrifies them with God's terrifying message, then next tells them not to be afraid. ??? There may be a few reasons for this. One might be that he's making a point of how grievous their sin is. This isn't some incidental lapse. This is a corporate rejection of God with far reaching consequences. They need to get this in perspective. At least for the moment they seem to. The people engage the last part of a prophetic formula. After they are judged and found out, they confess their sin.

Another reason for this severe telling may be to provide hope to those who are reading it in Babylon. This chapter winds out with a reminder that God will never abandon Israel. No matter how bad they mess up if they return God is always waiting for them and by their side. Similarly Samuel makes a commitment that on his part he will always be there to teach them. Whether they follow him or not is up in the air, but he will be there to guide them.

What a hopeful message to us now as it was to a people in captivity. No matter how far we fall we're not on our own. God is always there waiting for us to reach up in faith, to return to our Creator, and be lifted back up.