



Respectable Sins: Impatience and Irritability

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I've noticed over the years that the people I often esteem as models of mature Christianity – people who have walked with Christ for many, many years and seem to have it all together – are often the ones most ready to confess their struggles with the flesh.

When I was a university student I remember sitting down with the campus chaplain from my church one day. He was older – close to retirement age – and had been a Christian since he was a teenager. He carried his Bible around with him everywhere. It was a cheap paperback copy and the cover had fallen to pieces, I assumed, years and years before. The thing was covered with duct tape and was really ratty. If he set it down it fanned open all by itself. In contrast, my nice leather Bible hardly looked used – because it *was* hardly used. I took it to church on Sunday mornings and if I wasn't too busy I cracked it open every once in a while during the week. To me his Bible looked like it was a million years old, but even more than that it was a complete enigma to me. I wondered, first, why he didn't just buy a new one, but I also wondered how a man of such deep and profound faith could wear out a Bible – I mean, I thought he must have read it so many times he didn't need to anymore.

But one day he told me that, no, his Bible wasn't decades old – it was only about five years old. He wore it out not only because he was using it daily to teach from, but mainly because it was almost constantly in his hands and because he was reading it ever chance he had – because it was the Word of God that gave him victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil as he walked through every hour of every day.

Not only was it profound in that it reminded me that maybe a lot of my problem was a lack of time spent in God's Word, but it also taught me that no matter how much we progress spiritually in this world, we will always struggle with sin.

As I've said before, the Holy Spirit works like a microscope in our lives. He shows us our sin and then when we've dealt with it, he turns the power up and shows us more sins that we need to deal with. It's never ending. Don't listen to the guy who tells you he doesn't sin anymore – he's guilty of at least one: lying!

The point of this series is to help us see the sin that remains in our lives – especially the subtle ones that we're blind to. And this week I want to look at two of those sins: impatience and irritability.

These two are closely related to each other, and since they can be defined in quite a few different ways depending on the context, I want to narrow things down a bit and define impatience as a strong sense of annoyance at the (usually) unintentional faults and failures of others. This impatience is frequently expressed verbally and in a way that tends to humiliate the person who is the object of the impatience.

This kind of impatience is a response to the usually *unintentional* actions of someone else. Here's an example: I'm one of those people, who if there's nothing else to distract my attention, I'm usually deep in thought about something. Someone once asked me why I'm always walking around with a scowl on my face. I said, "I'm not scowling – I'm just thinking hard!" People have a problem getting my attention. Veronica will often see me in the room and start to tell me something, and I'll respond with, "Huh?" I was right there, but if I'm thinking about something else and she didn't get me attention first, I may have heard it, but I wasn't listening. This is the sort of thing that can cause a person to become annoyed, as I have to ask the person who spoke to me to repeat what they just said. If you're like me and you do this a lot, it means that the people around you have to learn to be patient!

Here's another example: When we get married we bring our habits and backgrounds with us. Some of us are accustomed to getting places early and with time to spare. For other people "on-time" means getting to Church before the first hymn is finished. And if two such people marry, well, it's an opportunity for both to learn some patience. Either one *could* respond with a "Why are you always late?" or "Why are you always rushing?" You could even say nothing at all and still communicate an attitude of

impatience. But you could also be patient, realizing that a harmonious relationship is more important than leaving the house at the time you'd prefer.

I think these are example that we can probably all identify with. They're also examples of situations that come up when two people live closely with each other. And you see, that's another issue here. Impatience and irritability tend to be sins that we practice at home – with our families – and a lot less frequently when we're out dealing with the world. Being impatient or irritable at work or at church would probably have repercussions that we don't want, so we restrain ourselves, but at home we let loose. That tells us something about our priorities, but it also drives home the point I made last time, that society sets certain boundaries, but within the boundaries we generally live as we please – not as God wants us to. Why? Because we can get away with it.

Now, it's also important to note that one person's failure to listen or another person's running late isn't really the cause of another's impatience. Those things simply provide the *opportunity* for the flesh to do its thing. The actual cause of our impatience lies in our own sinful hearts – in our own attitude of insisting that everybody around us conform to our expectations.

Can you think of situations in your life that tempt you to become impatient? You might say, "Who, me? I don't have a problem with impatience!" Well, you might not have a *problem* per se, but are you ever impatient? Let me suggest a few more possibilities.

As parents we can become impatient when our kids or teenagers are slow in responding to our training: "How many times do I have to tell you not to leave your shoes on the stairs?" How many times do I have to tell you to clean your room?" Or, "When are you going to stop playing with your food?" When you've told your kids something over and over, it's easy to become impatient when they don't seem to be learning the lessons you want them to. And the real problem with our impatient outbursts is that they only give vent to our *own* impatience. They don't really help to teach our kids anything – they only humiliate them. The same goes for our kids when they get impatient with brothers and sisters – they need to learn the same lessons we do about being patient with others.

Obviously we're not just impatient with other members of our own families. That may be the place where we're most likely to let our guard down. But how about this? How are you when you're in your car? We get very impatient when we're stuck behind a slow driver on the road. We can get very impatient waiting in line at the bank or the store. How about when you go to the post office to buy a book of stamps and the lady in front of you has a stack of twenty packages she wants to mail to Timbuktu? You may or may not see your own impatience, so I suggest that you ask your husband or wife, your kids, or a good Christian friend who knows you well. Ask them to tell you if there are areas of impatience they see in your life. Above all else, we need to acknowledge and repent of our impatience as the sin that it is.

St. Paul exhorts us in several of his Epistles, to be patient. In 1 Corinthians 13 – the great “love” chapter – he starts his long description of Godly love by saying, “Love is patient.” He could have started anywhere in that list, but no, he starts by telling us that first and foremost, love is patient. Think about that the next time your husband or wife does something that annoys you! In Galatians 5:22-23 Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit – the very characteristics that by their existence in us verify the presence of the Holy Spirit. Patience is one of the nine fruit of the Spirit. If you're a Christian, the Holy Spirit lives in you. Are you showing his fruit of patience? In Ephesians 4:1-2 Paul urges us to live our lives with patience, and in Colossians 3:12, he tells us that we are to put on patience. There was no question about it for St. Paul: the quality of patience is a godly quality that we need to cultivate in our lives. If patience reflects God's character – and think of all the times that God has been patient with you – we can be certain that impatience, the opposite of patience, is a sin that we have an obligation to stamp out of our lives. Impatience may be an “acceptable sin to us, but it's not acceptable to God!

I said earlier that impatience and irritability are closely related. Where impatience is a strong sense of annoyance or exasperation, *irritability*, as I define it, describes the *frequency* of impatience, or the *ease* with which we might become impatient over the slightest little provocation. A person who easily and

frequently becomes impatient is an irritable person. We can all be impatient at times, but the irritable person is impatient *most* of the time. He's the sort of person who makes you feel like you have to walk around on eggshells. He's not fun to be with, but if he's your family member or your co-worker, you don't have a choice.

Ask yourself this: Are you upset with someone or with some circumstances a lot of the time? If the answer is yes, then you just might be an irritable person. If you're upset with another person (or persons) a lot of the time, you may need to learn to overlook their unintentional actions. Proverbs 19:11 addresses the problem of anger (which we'll deal with next week), but it applies here too: “It is [one's] glory to overlook an offence.” St. Peter wrote saying, “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). You could say that if love covers a multitude of sins, how much more should it cover a multitude of acts that irritate us!

If you regularly catch the brunt of someone else's impatience – if you're often berated, criticised, or chewed out – how should you respond? Responding in kind isn't going to work. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that an irritable person probably isn't going to just sit there and listen while you give him a taste of his own medicine – all you'll do is start a war of words. This approach is not only unproductive – it's also completely unbiblical.

Maybe that's not you. Maybe you're the sort of person who doesn't respond verbally, but inwardly seethes and resent the person who had vented his or her impatience at you. Well, this is just as unproductive and sinful.

Biblically speaking you have two options. You can follow the example of Jesus, who “when he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). Sometimes this might be your only biblical option.

But the other thing Scripture says we can do is to confront the person who is always impatient and irritable – confront him and point out examples of his impatience. The hitch here is that you can only do this when you've resolved the issue in your

own heart and can speak to the other person for his benefit, not just to make your own life more pleasant. If you do this in a biblical manner and the person accepts what you say, you've likely enhanced your relationship with one another. Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matthew 18:15).

But if you confront him lovingly and he's hostile or denies that he's impatient and irritable you either have to be willing to take the next step, or back off and allow “love to cover a multitude of sins.” Either the issue needs to be taken before the Church or you need to follow the example of Jesus. But to follow Jesus' example really does require a firm belief in the sovereignty of God in every situation in your life. God is probably using this person's sinful actions to help you grow in the biblical virtues of patience and meekness.

This was what happened to Moses. Miriam, his sister, and Aaron, his brother, started speaking against him, but the writer of Numbers tells us that Moses responded with meekness. The text says, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). He didn't respond in kind – he trusted in God to work it out. And God did. He told the three of them to report to the Tabernacle. He descended in a cloud on them and when the cloud left Miriam was covered with leprosy for a week as a lesson to her.

I want to close with this reminder. We're looking at “respectable” sins – the sins we tolerate in our lives at the same time that we condemn the more blatant and flagrant sins of the society around us. We need to be as severe with ourselves over our own subtle sins as we are with the vile sins we condemn in others. May we never be like the self-righteous Pharisee in the Temple who prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men” but may we continually have the humble attitude of the tax collector who said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:11-13). Amen.