

*Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, by Henri Nouwen. Pages 91,93-94.

“Each time we hear the word *patience*, we tend to cringe. As children, we heard the word used so often in so many different circumstances that it seemed to be the word that was uttered when no one knew what else to say. It usually meant waiting—waiting until Mommy and Daddy came home, the bus arrived, the waiter brought the food, school ended, the pain decreased, the rain stopped, or the car was fixed. And so the word *patience* became associated with powerlessness, the inability to act, and a general state of passivity and dependence. It is therefore quite understandable that when anyone in authority—our parents, the priest, the minister, the teacher, the boss—said, “Just be patient,” we frequently felt belittled and offended. Often, it simply means that we were not going to be told what was really happening, that we were being kept in a subservient place, and that the only thing expected of us was to wait passively until someone with power decided to move again. It is sad that a deep and rich word like *patience* has such a perverted history in our minds. With such a history, it is difficult not to consider *patience* an oppressive word used by the powerful to keep the powerless under control. In fact, not a few among those in very influential positions have counseled patience simply to avoid necessary changes in church and society.

But true patience is the opposite of passive waiting in which we let things happen and allow others to make decisions. Patience means to enter actively into the thick of life and to fully bear the suffering within and around us. Patience is the capacity to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell as fully as possible the inner and outer events of our lives. It is to enter our lives with open eyes, ears, and hands so that we really know what is happening. Patience is an extremely difficult discipline precisely because it counteracts our unreflective impulse to flee or to fight. When we see an accident on the road, something in us pushes the accelerator. When someone approaches a sensitive issue, something in us tries to change the subject. When a shameful memory presents itself, something in us wants to forget it. Whatever the nature of our impatience, we want to leave the physical or mental state in which we find ourselves and move to another, less uncomfortable place. Essentially, impatience is experiencing the moment as empty, useless, meaningless. Our sole, all-pervasive desire has become to get away from this place and this time. There is no more hope in the moment. And if we cannot flee we flight. We fight the one who challenges our opinions, the people who question our power, and the circumstances that force us to change.

Patience requires us to go beyond the choice between fleeing or fighting. It is the third and the most difficult way. It calls for discipline because it goes against the grain of our impulses. Patience involves staying with it, living it through, listening carefully to what presents itself to us here and now. Patience means stopping on the road when someone in pain needs immediate attention. Patience means overcoming the fear of a controversial subject. It means paying attention to shameful memories and searching for forgiveness without having to forget. It means welcoming sincere criticism and evaluating changing conditions. In short, patience is a willingness to be influenced even when this requires giving up control and entering into unknown territory.

Patience as an active entering into the thick of life opens us to a new experience of time. Patience makes us realize that the Christian who has entered into discipleship with Jesus Christ lives not only with a new mind but also in a new time. It is this full time, pregnant with new life, that can be found through the discipline of patience. As long as we are slaves of the clock and the calendar, our time remains empty and nothing really happens. Thus, we miss the moment of grace and salvation. But when patience prevents us from running from the painful moment in the false hope of finding our treasure elsewhere, we can begin to see that the fullness of time is already here and that salvation is already taking place. Then, too, we can discover that in and through Christ all human events can become divine events in which we discover the compassionate presence of God.”