

**Isn't the concept of time interesting?** I was trying to find out who invented the concept of time, but no one seems able to say definitively. **Some scientists believe the moon was used to calculate time as early as the Palaeolithic Era, perhaps 30,000 years ago.** We know the Sumerians, about 4,000 years ago, introduced the sexagesimal system based on the number 60. That's why we have 60 seconds in a minute and 60 minutes in an hour. **This past February, researchers at the University of Colorado at Boulder demonstrated a new clock based on the vibrations of strontium atoms trapped in a laser grid.** This new clock loses less than one second of time every 200 million years. That's a lot more accurate than the clock in my office with wooden gears which loses three minutes a day, whose time I adjust by taping paper clips to the pendulum.

In addition to the hard science of time, which is extremely precise, there is the perception of time, which is relative. **Time is experienced differently by different people.** Here's an example: It's a month away from school letting out for the summer, which my sons think is forever. And it's a month away from my having to pay my quarterly taxes, but it feels like tomorrow. **That's the perception of time, and it's always relative or conditional.**

We've been talking about maturity. Specifically, about Jesus' instructions to his disciples in the gospel of Matthew, "Be ye perfect, even as your Heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48) We noted that the original meaning wasn't *perfect*, but *mature*. **"You be mature, as God is mature. You be grown up, as God is grown up."** We've talked about the qualities of maturity: one being *self-regulation*—the ability to live within appropriate boundaries, another being *perspective*—the ability to give situations and circumstances their appropriate weight. **Today, I'd like to talk about *delayed gratification*—the ability to delay our immediate pleasure for some future good.**

When Spencer was little, we opened a savings account for him at the bank. **Whenever anyone gave him any money, we urged him to put some of it in the account so he'd have money for later.** When he was little, he resisted it. He wanted to spend all his money right then. The money was burning a hole in his pocket. **Now he's saving for his first car, he goes out and mows somebody's yard, and the first thing he wants to do is go to the bank and put that money in the bank.** He's now willing to delay the immediate pleasure of spending for the future good of owning a car. **It'll be good for him.** It will worry me sick.

A real problem in our country is that we're not good at delaying gratification. **For the first time since the Great Depression, our savings rate is negative.** The U.S. Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis says we're spending more money than we're earning. **Part of that is because of increased costs and decreased wages, but a much bigger part is our use of credit cards and our unwillingness to wait until tomorrow to buy something we want today.** But one quality of maturity is the self-discipline to say to ourselves, "I am willing to sacrifice now so I can experience something better down the road."

**Joan's mom just turned 90 years old, great lady, but losing her short term memory.** We visit her every day and she tells us the same story, about sending all five of her kids to college. She grew up poor, didn't have access to an education, wanted desperately for her children to attend college and have opportunities, so worked hard to make that happen. **Joan's father died when she was 13 and her mom went to work as a domestic in an elderly couple's home, saving her money, making their clothes, never taking a vacation, working six days a week, doing without, so she could invest in a better future for her children.** And boy, is she proud. You're with her even a minute and she'll let you know that all of her kids went to college. That's been her attitude all her life. **What hard work, what sacrifice, must I do today to make my tomorrow better.**

**But delayed gratification isn't just about how we spend our money.** Sometimes we have difficult periods in our relationships and the only thing that gets us through them is knowing things will be better down the road. **There have been times in our marriage when I've been hard to live with, when Joan has had to say, "I am willing to endure the difficulty of being married to Philip today, in order to experience the joy of being with him in the future."** She's probably wondering when that rosy future might be.

There is also an aspect of delayed gratification in our spiritual lives. **Saint John of the Cross wrote about the dark night of the soul, those times in our lives when God seems absent.** We've all experienced that feeling. It would be easy to cave into despair, to give up our faith and lose our hope, if we didn't remember that sunrise follows night. **So we've said to ourselves, "I am willing to endure this present darkness because I know I will see God's Light again."**

Otherwise, we would despair. Mature people understand that life can be profoundly difficult, that we don't usually get what we want when we want it. **But instead of despairing over that, instead of being depressed and discouraged by that, mature people are able to say, "That's life, and I know if I endure this difficulty today, it will make my life better tomorrow."** So they persist, they ride the hard days out, knowing light follows darkness.

I was speaking earlier about the relativity of time, how one month seems forever to some people and fleeting to someone else. **When we have to sacrifice for some future good, the promised land, the payoff, can seem far away.** I think of Moses in the wilderness forty years. Forty years away from Canaan. So far away. Moses is just aching to get there. **Then God tells Moses he won't ever set foot there, that Joshua will lead the Israelites across the Jordan.** You know, sometimes we will work and sacrifice and we'll never benefit personally. But we know others will, and that will be enough. That was true for Moses. Moses understood delayed gratification. Moses doesn't whine. He doesn't complain that God is unfair. **It is enough for Moses to know that while he won't benefit from his struggle, others will.** God's last gift to Moses is to take him to Mount Nebo and let him see, spread out before him, the land God had promised them.

**Some of you, you work so hard, sacrifice so much, give so much, so others will have it better.** You might never see the consequences of your work firsthand, but you do it anyway. Because you know the principle of delayed gratification—that when we work and struggle today, there will be a benefit tomorrow. And that is enough for you. **If you asked me to define what it means to be a mature person, I would recall the words of the Quaker Elton Trueblood and say, “Someone who plants a tree under whose shade he'll never sit.”**