

The Fruit of the Spirit is Patience

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“The fruit of the Spirit is...patience” (Galatians 5:22).

INTRODUCTION

I told Katie “I need a good, funny story about patience to begin my lesson.” As she was sharing her thoughts, I got up from the table to do something I thought was needed right then and there. When I returned to the table, I said “I’m sorry, what were you saying?” And she looked at me and said, “I think we found your story.”

The Bible sometimes calls it “longsuffering.” What Tim Keller calls the ability to put up with a lot of trouble for a long time without blowing up. Sometimes it’s called “forbearance.” When you have student loans coming due, and you can’t afford to pay it, so you ask for help, and the company offers you a forbearance. This means to let it go for a while. But the word we typically use is “patience.”

A GOD WHO IS ENDLESSLY PATIENT

I am not a patient man. On the other hand, my God is “endlessly patient” (Exodus 34:6 MSG). Egypt, you are getting on my last nerve and treating my people badly. I’m calling on you to stop it. “How long will you give me”? “Let’s try 400 years. But not a day more.” We read about the wickedness Noah had to put up with. But Peter says those people who were disobedient long ago did so “when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built” (1 Peter 3:20). “Our Lord is not slow in keeping his promise,” said Peter, “as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9 NIV). Paul speaks of the “riches of his kindness, forbearance, and patience,” and says “don’t you realize that it’s God’s kindness that is intended to lead you to repentance” (Rom 2:4)? Sometimes we see bad people doing bad things and we can’t believe God is waiting. We forget that God waited on you and me; and that he waits on us still. “Bear in mind,” says the aged Apostle, “that our Lord’s patience means salvation” (2 Peter 3:15 NIV). “What if,” asks Paul out loud, while thinking through God’s plan to graph Gentiles into the

tree of life. “What if God bore with great patience the objects of his wrath...what if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy” (Rom 2:22-23 NIV)? “I was the worst of all sinners,” confesses Paul. But do you know why God decided to save me? Me—the chief of sinners? Because Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He saw the worst of the bunch. And “for that very reason” Paul says, “I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:16 NIV).

Love is patient. Love is Kind. Love is not easily angered. These are all saying the same thing. In the Old Testament, when it says God is “slow to anger” (8-x no less), the writers use the same word that means “patient” (Ex 34:6; Psalm 103:8).

CHRISTIANS CALLED TO LIVE OUT THIS STORY

So Christians are called to live out of that story. Paul wrote to young Timothy and said, “you know all about my teaching and my way of life—my purpose, faith, *patience*, love, and endurance” (2 Tim 3:10). When he writes to the young church in Thessalonica, he urges them “be patient with everyone” (1 Thess 5:14). “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love,” writes Paul to the Ephesians (Eph 4:2). “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly beloved,” writes Paul to the brothers in Colossae, “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12). In fact, Paul prayed for the Colossians, including that God would give them great power, endurance, and patience (Col 1:11). Even when you teach others, it’s good to preach the Word. It’s good to correct, rebuke, and encourage—but do so “with great patience” (2 Tim 4:2).

And patient is needed for the long journey. “We do not want you to become lazy,” writes the author of Hebrews, “but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised” (Hebrews 6:12 NIV).

In many cases, patience is called for in the face of terrible persecution. Paul provides a laundry list of ways he commended himself, such as “in troubles, hardships, and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots, in hard work, sleepless night and hunger” (2 Cor 6:4-5 NIV). But he also includes “in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love...and in the power of God” (2 Cor 6:6-7 NIV). That is why he is able to end that moving section with these hopeful words: “through glory and dishonor...dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet

possessing everything" (2 Cor 6:8-10 NIV). Patient endurance is our calling, says Paul, without anger or taking vengeance.

Some in James' audience were being tasked with slave labor; some were terribly mistreated; some were getting sick and thin so the rich and powerful could get fat and lazy. Some were even killed while calling out for God to intervene. "Be patient, brothers and sisters," writes James to a hurting people. "Be patient until the Lord's coming" (James 5:7 NIV). "As an example of patience in the face of suffering," continues James, "take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (James 5:10-11 NIV). "Be patient," says James. "See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (James 5:7-8 NIV).

In 1958, while on a speaking tour, Martin Luther King, Jr., was nearly killed when stabbed by an assailant in Harlem. It was almost as if he was expecting it. Because in March of that year, Dr. King gave these stirring words:

We know that sacrifice is involved, that brutality will be faced, that savage conduct will need to be endured, that slick trickery will need to be overcome, but we are resolutely prepared for all of this. We are prepared to meet whatever comes with love, with firmness and with unyielding nonviolence.¹

Paul knew the dream, the hope, did not always match the lived reality. Our hope is eschatological; thus he writes, "The Lord is at hand." Drawing inspiration, MLK gave another memorable speech in Montgomery, Alabama in 1965, including these words:

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."

How long? Not long, because "no lie can live forever."

How long? Not long, because "you shall reap what you sow."

How long? Not long.

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,
Yet that scaffold sways the future,

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Who Speaks for the South?" (March 1958). https://www.crmvet.org/info/5803_mlk.pdf

And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

How long? Not long, because “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”²

REASONS FOR OUR STRUGGLE

If we know that God knows all things, and has power over all things, and we are safe and secure in Christ, then why do we struggle with patience? Allow me to make four suggestions.

Perhaps we struggle with pride. Pride goes way back. Paul said not to appoint a novice to be a church leader, lest “being puffed up with pride he fall under the same condemnation as the devil.” Pride goes way back! Pride is thinking I must be in control. My way is better. My current view has to be right. Do you think it’s possible that you might be wrong? Or that you might be partially wrong? Why do we think it a waste of time to listen, pray, and discern? Possibly because we are too convinced of ourselves. That’s pride. Warren Buffett once told leaders about how to deal with an unruly subordinate: “You can always tell them to [take a hike] tomorrow.” Why rush into something like that? Today may be a day to listen. To reflect. To discern. It requires humility.

Perhaps we struggle with cynicism. This when you just don’t think the story is going to get better. Why be patient if you are convinced it won’t do any good? This is a lack of faith, when you don’t believe. Our Lord rejected cynicism and taught us to live in hope.

Perhaps we simply forget. Jesus tells a story of a man who was forgiven a huge debt, but was unwilling to forgive his neighbor of a much smaller debt. How soon we forget. I am more patient with someone when the situation is one with which I can relate. Perhaps we need to remember. Can you think of a time when someone was patient with you? If you can’t, let me share one with you: my Lord could have returned a long time ago. But he was waiting for you.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Our God is Marching On!” (March 25, 1965). <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/our-god-marching>

Perhaps we fail to appreciate the gift of time. Someone once ran up the renowned violinist Fritz Kreisler. She said, “I would give my life to learn how to play like you do.” Kreisler replied, “I did.” Michael Simmons coined the “5 hour rule,” suggesting that truly successful people give at least 1 hour a day, or 5 hours a week, to learning or practicing a skill. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, borrows from the work of Errickson to suggest that it takes 10,000 hours of correctly practicing a skill in order to become a world-class expert. According to Healthline, it may take anywhere from 18 to 254 days to form a new habit, and another 66 days for that new habit to become automatic. Time is a gift, and patience is practicing the gift of time.

Finally, we may struggle with a lack of trust in God’s timing. Several times in the Psalms, David reminds us to wait on the Lord (Psalm 27:14; 31:24; 37:1). Isaiah reminds us that those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength and will mount up with wings like Eagles. Trust in God’s timing. Patience is a way of saying to the Lord, “I trust, I will trust, I will trust in you.”