# The Fruit of the Spirit is… Patience and Perspective
# James 5:7-11 and Col. 3:1-4; 12-15

This morning's fruit of the Spirit: patience. I did not plan this sermon series so that patience would be the topic right before election day, but there you have it. Let's consider it Spirit-inspired timing. Patience will be required no matter what happens after Tuesday!

Before I read our next passage from Colossians, I'll note that the word "patience" in the Bible is also translated as, and appears in other places in the Bible as: forbearance, longsuffering, endurance. It's a versatile word!

## Colossians 3:1-4, 12-14

3 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are
above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your
minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for
you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When
Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed
with him in glory. (skipping down to verse 12…)

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with
compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear
with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another,
forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also
must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds
everything together in perfect harmony.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

God is never in a hurry. That's a phrase that I'll be repeating a few times during this message. God is never in a hurry. That's important to keep in mind when *we're* trying to exercise patience—whether with other human beings, or patience with ourselves, and when we're waiting on God for an answer to prayer or a resolution to a problem. God is never in a hurry.

Another way of saying this is: God is patient. God is patient with us in our humanness and struggles—God is ever so gentle and compassionate in his care for us, as James points out. And, God is patient in working out his *purposes* in our lives, and in the world. God is patient. God is never in a hurry. Perhaps that feels like both good news and bad news. The good news is, God is patient with us. The hard news is, God is patient in working his purposes out, and that takes time!

Now, I wonder… what types of everyday situations test your patience?

- Waiting in line somewhere (fill in the blank where), or stuck in traffic
- Waiting at the Dr.'s office, and they're running a little late
- The opinionated person who talks, but doesn't listen
- Trying to navigate and use our smart phone (or other technology)

These may test our patience, but they are mostly mildly difficult or annoying situations, perhaps some of them being an issue of delayed gratification.

Now… what does patience look like in these other situations:

- A loved one has an illness, has been to the doctor, had tests, and now is waiting for results. Or, the test results have come in and the physicians need more time and more tests to figure out exactly what the diagnosis is.
- The patience that's needed in the blessed work of parenting and teaching...
- A person is unemployed and looking for a job so they can at least pay their bills, and it's taking a long time to find a good job.
- It's an election year, and… need I say more?

What does patience look like in *all* of these situations—the everyday annoyances, *and* the longer-term difficulties and challenges? And why does God want us to be patient? Especially these days! It isn't easy.

Before we try to answer these, let's be clear about what patience is not. Patience is not *passively* waiting, until something happens to relieve the situation. If all we're doing is passively waiting for something, we usually end up becoming antsy, irritated, fretful, or even angry. Patience is not passive waiting. It *involves* waiting, but not passively.

I remember a time when I was in line at our Shoreline post office sending a package to our son who lived out of state, and watched with fascination as the line got longer, and the workers at the counter got fewer. They started with three workers, but one by one they closed their window and put out the "next window"

sign—until they were down to one window. That didn't fit my best efficiency practices mind! I tried to be curious ("It's better to be curious than furious") but curiosity soon went out the window and I became inwardly agitated. One customer couldn't contain himself and was grumbling to anyone who would listen. Then, when he got to the counter he said, "I've been waiting very patiently!" Well, not really… However, I was with him in spirit! He just verbalized how I was feeling and what I had been thinking. I, too, had been waiting, but not with patience.

Yes, patience *includes* waiting, but it's more than that. Patience is not just something we call upon to steel ourselves when we are subjected to a situation that's out of our control. And, it's not passive; passivity is not patience. Patience is an attitude and disposition, it's a state of heart and mind; it's part of the character of Jesus Christ being formed in us by the loving (and patient!) work of the Holy Spirit. And out of that character, patience becomes something we exercise and practice, in an active sort of way, even in situations that are out of our control. Or, *especially* in situations that are out of our control. And, let's be honest, there is way more that's *out of our control* in our lives than we think.

Let me try to explain this active nature of patience by way of sharing an observation that commentators and students of the Scripture have made about *all* of the fruit of the Spirit:

That is, when Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit he begins with love, and that's really the primary fruit he means to put forth. Everything else after that—joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—all of those flow out of love. Love creates peace, patience, kindness, and so on.

This makes even more sense when we look at our text for today from Colossians. The apostle Paul loves lists—his letters are full of lists—and he makes another list here of the qualities that Christians are to put on, like clothing—and it's a very similar list to the fruit of the Spirit list: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And then at the end he says (practically in reverse order from the fruit of the Spirit)—at the end he says, "Over all of these, put on love, which binds all of them together in perfect harmony."

Love is the golden thread running through each piece of clothing that makes the whole ensemble. Or we could say it's the scarf or the belt or jacket that makes it fit together. It's the same thing in the famous 1Corinthians 13 passage, where Paul, in another long list, describes love: "love is… patient (interesting that patience is first in that list), love is kind," and so forth. Sounds

just like Colossians 3 and just like the list of the fruit of the Spirit with each of the attributes clearly explained as flowing out of love. Love is *this*, love does *this*, love doesn't do *that,* but rather does this…

So what's the point? The point is, if patience is an outgrowth of love in our lives, then it is not just a sitting back and waiting, passively, looking at our watch or passing time, and then saying "Well, finally!" when something happens. Patience is proactive; it's an ability to seek what's best in a particular situation. Because that's what love does; love seeks what's best. As we talked about three weeks ago, love is proactive. It isn't just tolerating a person or situation. Love is proactive in seeking what's best, and patience is one manifestation of that love.

I go back in my mind and try to imagine that post office situation and what patience (as a manifestation of love) would have looked like, for me, in that case. Patience could have looked like praying for the postal workers, or anyone for that matter! I'm sure the post office is short-staffed, and busy. It could've looked like singing (inwardly), or creating a gratitude list, or praying for people I knew were in need. It could've meant spreading joy by smiling or saying hello to someone in line, instead of trying to fix government inefficiencies in my mind, or worrying about what I wasn't getting done at work or at home because I was stuck in a slow line.

And again… God is never in a hurry. God is always present; God lives in the present moment. Not in the future or somewhere else. And, God is *doing something* to work out what's best for us or others in a given situation—whether that situation is a one-time irritant, a delay of gratification, or whether it's a longer-haul struggle of some kind. God is not twiddling his thumbs, or watching us like someone watching television ("I wonder what's happening at the post office in Shoreline…" then changing the channel to downtown Seattle—"Oh no, another shooting; what are these people going to do???"). No, God is working out his purposes—maybe not visibly at the moment, probably under the radar, and probably not on our timeline; but working things out nonetheless.

Patience, then, sometimes means the endurance of difficulty, or even some pain, over a period of time. This is why the word "longsuffering" is a very good translation of this word in the New Testament. Sometimes we have to "suffer long" with a situation in our lives or the life of someone we care about or some other circumstance that is out of our control. That's the hard news. The good news is that the suffering servant, Jesus, walks with us in those circumstances.

I think of black Americans and native Americans, suffering long, exercising true patience in the search for justice and equity, and it reminds me of the saints in the book of Revelation, enduring suffering and asking, "How long, O Lord?!?"

And they are assured that God is present with them, in love, and that God will redeem their suffering, and transform it, and ultimately relieve them of it.

In our first reading from James, he goes so far as to say that those who suffer long and endure are to be considered as heroes, and he uses Job as an example, and then affirms that… God is never in a hurry. That God is gracious and compassionate when we suffer long, works all things for good, and knows what is best for us.

The apostle Paul affirms this in Romans 5:3-4 when he says that "suffering produces *endurance* (same word translated as patience), and *endurance* produces character, and character produces hope; and hope does not disappoint us because God's love is being poured into us by the Holy Spirit."

I hear these words as another good news/bad news deal. The good news: God is at work! And God's love is being poured out as God is developing our character! Yay! The bad news: this doesn't sound like any fun! And, it sounds like it takes time!

But in the grand scheme of things, I'll take the good news of having God's love poured into my life with a Holy Spirit fill-up, over having all of my wants gratified when I want them.

The word translated as “patience” in Greek is one of those wonderful compound words—a combination of two words in Greek: it’s the word macrothumia. *Thumia* is the main word for anger in the New Testament; *macro* obviously means big or large or long. So when you put these two words together, macrothumia could be literally translated as “long-tempered.” As opposed to… short tempered.

So, patience is the grace and ability to be long-tempered. Patience means that we know how to stretch out, or put into suspension our angry or anxious reflexes.

I want to be quick to point out: never in the bible does it say that anger is bad, or wrong. Sometimes anger is an appropriate response to bad things. So the Bible doesn’t say that anger is bad. Rather, it instructs us how to hold anger in a healthy way, and then channel our anger and energy in positive ways. Here, as in other places, it encourages patience, an ability to be long-tempered.

Being long-tempered means that with the Spirit’s help we can take the time to calm ourselves down so we can think clearly and act lovingly. I like to think of it as a slowing down. Slowing down (inwardly and outwardly). Because… God is never in a hurry. And when we can slow ourselves down, we move at the speed of God—Godspeed! In other words, go at the speed of God, which is… not frantic

and in a hurry! But blessed, at peace, and with peace; which is perhaps why patience follows peace on the list of the fruit of the Spirit.

I wonder how many of us have prayed for God to give us patience? (and give it to me now!) I have. Many times, over the years. And I've noticed that when I ask God for patience, God then puts me in a situation where I have to exercise it. Or maybe I'm already in the middle of one on those situations! When I pray for patience God doesn't just wash over me a bunch of warm fuzzies and all of the sudden I'm this calm person instead of a tangled knot of frustration. No, when I pray for patience, I get put in a situation where I have to exercise it!

I used to teach swimming lessons every summer in high school and college, and not once did I instruct kids about swimming using a chalk board, or clever illustrations or a lecture. We got in the water together. Sometimes the kids got water up their nose. Sometimes they sank. Some of them were afraid of the water. Some of them got mad at me or their parents for making them take swimming lessons. One kid got mad at the water, and was cursing the water and punching it with his fist! Eventually, though, they got it. They learned how to swim. But they had to get in the water.

And as we learn how to be patient, sometimes we get thrown in the deep end. But Jesus is always there in the water with us, our patient and gracious

instructor, to make sure we don't drown, and to teach us, eventually, that learning to swim is better than just being angry at the water. If we think about it, we are, collectively, in the deep end as a society, and we need to encourage each other as we learn to swim these waters, these days. We need Jesus, and, we need each other.

A final thought: As God works out his purposes in our lives, and in the world, we're invited to enlarge our perspective as we learn patience.

In Paul's words from our Colossians reading, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." This doesn't mean walking around with eyes up in the air and ignoring things around us down here. Paul is using language that reflects their understanding of the cosmology of that day: heaven is up there, and we down here. We know and believe, now, that heaven is all around us. So, "setting your minds on things above" means that we try to have a large, even eternal, perspective—a mindset that keeps everything in large perspective.

And in light of eternity, in light of the Kingdom of God, and in light of our lives being "hidden with God in Christ" (a mysterious phrase, which means an inner knowing and being known by God, being held and protected by God, covered in soul and spirit, and being part of something big and eternal)—in light of all this,

the petty irritants or annoying situations, or frustrating inconveniences may be seen as not that big of a deal.

When we *lose* our perspective, we become impatient and short-tempered, and our world begins to shrink. God invites us to try to keep the big picture. To enlarge our perspective. And that can become a good prayer in a given moment: God, help me to keep a bigger picture here. To say, "In light of eternity…"

And for those situations where we truly suffer long—with a troubling family situation, or a chronic illness, or an injustice, or if you feel like our current social and political environment is causing you distress, our work in those situations is to keep praying, keep seeking God's presence and guidance, keep doing as much good as we can (do the next right thing right in front of us…), and take good care of ourselves and each other.

I think of an old friend named Ron, who passed away a couple of years ago, sadly, at a relatively young age. Ron was a little older than I am, and he got into a fair amount of trouble as a younger man, including going to jail once. He became a Christian in mid-life. He was a wonderful Christian man who became a leader and regular musician in our church in Seattle. He told me that, during his rowdy younger years, his mom never judged him, and was always kind to him, even when he was causing distress. A few years after he started following Jesus and

was mending relationships, his mom told him that she had prayed for him every day for 30 years. Just lifted him up to God and to God's light; gave him to God. For 30 years. Every day. That's longsuffering! That's patience. Not passive, but loving, and active. Prayer plus kindness.

As we approach God in prayer and worship, let us recognize that all of the small irritations as well as the large injustices have been died for—absorbed into Christ on the cross, whose hunger for justice is even greater than ours, who is indeed gracious and compassionate, abounding in steadfast love.

The apostle Peter puts it beautifully (2Peter 3:15): "Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for the Lord to act, strive to be found by him at peace; and regard the patience of the Lord as salvation." As a saving grace. Because… God is never in a hurry.

I to the Hills Will Lift My Eyes… will be new so Ian will play through it once.